NF

ISSUE #56:
FINDING A WAY FORWARD

INTERVIEW:
TYRANNICAL OVERLORD
VOLDI WAY

20 YEARS WITH THE
GAME BOY ADVANCE

ADVANCE WARS:
A CHRONICLE OF CONFLICT

METROID DREAD

WARIOWARE:
GET IT TOGETHER!

NINTENDO SWITCH
(OLED MODEL)

POKÉMON
BRILLIANT DIAMOND & SHINING PEARL

CRUIS'N BLAST

NICKELODEON ALL-STAR BRAWL

SORA ARRIVES IN
SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE

EVERYONE REALLY IS HERE!

AND YOU THOUGHT we wouldn't remember!

(Actually, you all might've forgotten by now.)

Exactly three years ago, for NF Issue #36 with Super Smash Bros. Ultimate on the cover, we printed an extra-tall wall poster that included an image of every playable fighter in the game. Every playable fighter, that is, who was confirmed by the time that issue was sent off to print! We knew that the lineup wasn't completely complete, and so we made a promise to you all that a future NF issue would come with an "extension" poster that could be added to the bottom of the first one to finalize the piece.

Well, the future is now! With Sora from Kingdom Hearts confirmed as the final DLC fighter for Ultimate, we've now been able to assemble that long-awaited extension and print it for all of our physical edition subscribers and back issue purchasers.

Speaking of buying back issues, you might be a new reader who's joined the Force at some point in the last three years, and so you don't have the original, larger top portion of this two-poster set! But not to worry, as you can visit **NintendoForceMagazine.com** and order a copy of Issue #36 for yourself. We still have several in stock, thanks to prescient planning from my past self. (Good job, 2018 me!)

The new poster begins with the final fighters of the base game roster who weren't revealed yet back when NF #36 went to press, then continues to all of the DLC fighters who were added to the mix as part of Fighters Pass Vol. 1 and Vol. 2. To fill out the poster further, we've then added all the other unique fighters who share character select slots with the more prominent "primary" fighters above – that means alt costume characters like Alph and the seven Koopalings, the other gender choices for fighters like Wii Fit Trainer, all of the Minecraft fighters and Heroes from Dragon Quest and every variety of Villager and Inkling to round things out. *(Plus one stowaway?)*

Please note that due to a slight change in printing dimensions, this extension poster will have a bit of extra black space on the left and right edges. If you'd like them to line up perfectly, then carefully trim those edges with scissors. Sorry for that! It's been three years! Some things change over time! **— LUCAS**

+

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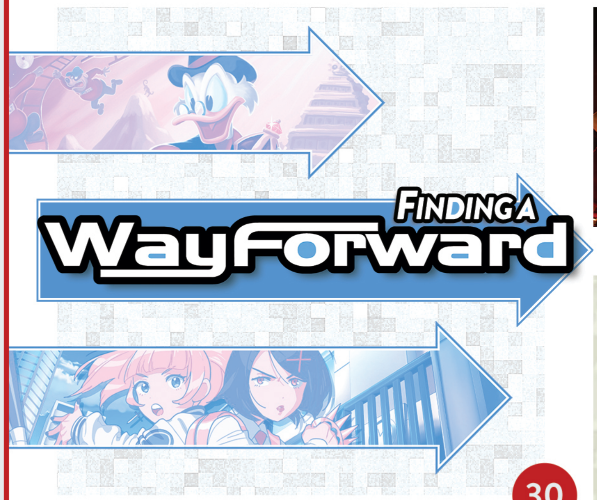

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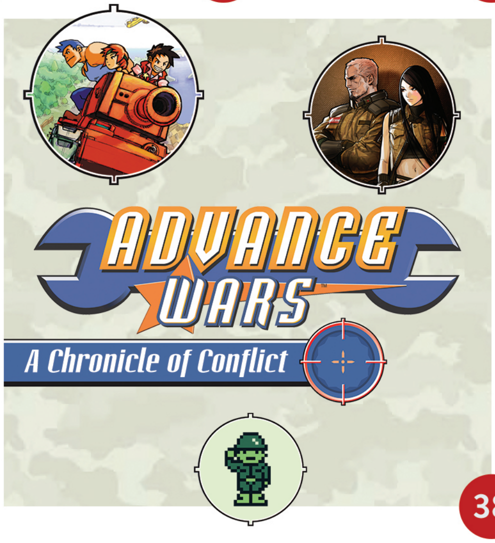

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ON THE COVER

Advance Wars is charging back into action for the first time since our magazine has been in existence! Naturally we have to recognize its reawakening with the greatest honor we can bestow: the coveted front cover position. WayForward's tapping back into 20-year-old nostalgia by reviving this game from 2001 (and its sequel), but they're giving old fans of the original an extra bit of love by remaking the 2001 Advance Wars box art for this new key art! Andy looks happier than ever, Max is extra buff and Sami's got a bazooka! Yikes!

INBOX

ADVANCE NOTICE

Welcome, Force fans, to the finale of NF Magazine's ninth year! It's amazing that our journey has already brought us this far beyond the point when we had to say farewell to Nintendo Power. And what's even more amazing is that, this far into our run as NF, there are still some classic Nintendo franchises that have never had a chance to step into our spotlight – since they've been inactive this entire time!

So, ladies and gentlemen, I'm proud to present an issue headlined by Advance Wars! This seminal strategy series has a history reaching all the way back to the '80s, though it didn't leave Japan for the first time until 20 years ago, in 2001. Then it had a solid run of about six and a half years . . . before it went dark in the wake of 2008's Days of Ruin.

It's always a joy to cover Nintendo's newest titles, whatever they may be, but it's especially fun when a franchise that's been asleep for so long finally wakes up and gets moving again! We have the developers at WayForward to thank for that, as they're the ones who've been tapped by Nintendo to revive the brand by remaking both Advance Wars and its 2003 sequel Advance Wars 2: Black Hole Rising. Their effort, Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp, is in its final stages of development now, and we'll take a good long look at what to expect from it in the pages ahead.

Before that, though, we've got a double-header in the Features section to set the stage: a look back at WayForward's work of revitalizing and re-imagining other companies' brands in the past, as well as a complete history of the whole Wars series so far. Taken together, you'll be more than ready to enlist and become a capable commander for the Orange Star Army!

We're also thrilled to have an exclusive interview with WayForward's CEO (and Tyrannical Overlord) Voldi Way, exclusive info on Dawn of the Monsters (which WayForward is also working on) and probably some more WayForward fun ahead too. Hey, they're bringing Advance Wars back to life! We owe them a debt of gratitude!

Lucas M Thomas

LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ISSUE #55:
OCTOBER 2021

We had to put in extra effort to be able to have separate issues for September and October this year, but the glowing response to our dark Metroid Dread edition made it all worth the while! Hopefully you've had a chance to run through Planet ZDR yourself by now, but if you need further information on whether the game would be a good fit for you, our full review lies ahead in this issue!

Player's Poll time! Last time we asked if you're familiar with the Wars games, and if so, which was the first one you played, as well as your pick for the best of the series. Then we wanted to know your thoughts on how remakes should handle their source material. Finally, we sought your thoughts on which brand WayForward should try to get their hands on next. Let's dive into the Inbox and pull out some responses to print!

LETTERS

I am familiar with the Advance Wars series, however, I haven't ever played a single game in the series. That being said, I have always been very drawn to the design of General Sturm. I don't know why, he just checks off a lot of aesthetic boxes that appeal to me specifically. I like his gas mask and his cape and his imposing large hat. Despite never having played the games, he is an imposing figure in my mind.

As for the subject of remakes, I actually think the less faithful they are, the more interesting they are. Of course, I also think that preserving games is important and that these remakes should not serve as replacements for them. I just think that a new director bringing their own spin to a project is something that's incredibly important. I like seeing how other people interpret the works I love – even if that ends up being incredibly different than the original work I loved.

In terms of a series I would like to see WayForward revive, honestly, I have no clue. I'm sure I'll like whatever they end up reviving next, because they have a pretty good track record. If I had to pick one series, and this is an incredible pipe dream, it would be Castlevania. It's been noticeably absent from the gaming scene since Lords of Shadow, and I'd really like to see a fresh set of eyes on it. I think it'd be good for it.

– KYE BYLLESBY

I've loved Advance Wars since I was a kid and picked up Dual Strike on DS! After that I had to go back and play the original two GBA games. Dual Strike will always be my favorite, but I think Days of Ruin doesn't get enough love! Unfortunately it failed as a reboot of the series but it still stands as a good game – at least in this reader's opinion!

When it comes to older games staying true to the original vs. getting creative, it all depends on the game. For some that haven't aged as well I think creative improvements can make a massive difference, like the faster sail in Wind Waker HD. However sometimes those changes can alter the intended game feel and make a game feel less enjoyable, like Majora's Mask 3D.

I'd love to see WayForward's take on some old-school run-and-gun arcade action series like Gunstar Heroes, or, since they're working with Nintendo for Advance Wars, why not bring back some classic series like Ice Climber?

– SAMUEL KONICHEK

Brilliant! I'll begin bugging everyone I know at WayForward to pitch an Ice Climber revival to Nintendo!

I am familiar with the Advance Wars series of games, even going back to its Japan-exclusive days as Famicom Wars! I distinctly remember playing the first Advance Wars during my middle school days and really being into the variety of COs you can play as. (I really stuck with Andy because of his rockin' theme song!)

In regards to older games getting modern remakes, I think there should be a balance of keeping in what made a game memorable but also introducing quality-of-life improvements to make it a more enjoyable experience for more

A VISION OF A REVIEW REVISION

I was reading the Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition review of Future Connected in Issue #48 and noticed some factual errors in the text.

You mention that Shulk has two new Monado Arts (Armour and Eater) and that Melia has some new elements to summon. That is incorrect.

Shulk's two last Monado Arts are retrieved via sidequests in the main game: Armour from the Machina Village and Eater from the ruins series of quests in Makna Forest.

For Melia, maybe you didn't have her leveled enough in the main game. The last two elements she gets are Earth at Level 47 and Ice at Level 56.

Cheers!! **— DEQUIMET**

Thanks for the catch! Though knowing that those Monado Arts weren't entirely new (just new to me) wouldn't have lessened my enjoyment of the Future Connected adventure. In fact, I'm grateful that Shulk came equipped with both of them by default in that extra story, because I never would have known to seek them out in the main campaign!

Xenoblade Chronicles is *dense* with sidequests, and there's no way I would've had the time to complete them all. Seriously, there's over 400 of them! Kudos to anyone who's had the commitment to find and finish them all. That takes true dedication!

players, like varying difficulty options.

I've always been a fan of WayForward's work with both their original titles and numerous remakes (DuckTales: Remastered is one of my favorites!), but if they could revive another, I would love to see their spin on a new 2D Castlevania in the "Metroidvania" style the series used to be known for. Currently playing through the Castlevania Advance Collection has got me wishing for that kind of a series reboot!
— BOBBY TROGE

Not as familiar as I'd like to be! The only game in the series that I have is Advance Wars 2: Black Hole Rising, but I really enjoyed it. I've always preferred turn-based to real-time strategy.

Quality-of-life changes, minor tweaks to fix issues in the original and added content are always welcome in a remake, but the core gameplay should stay true to the original. If you want to make major changes, then you should just make a sequel or a new franchise instead of a remake.

Talk about decision paralysis! Since I'm looking at my Game Boy games, I'd love to see WayForward give the old Wario Land series some love. WarioWare is great and all, but it's no replacement for the puzzle-solving transformational shenanigans that Wario used to get up to! **— BRIAN ALLEN**

I am going to date myself pretty heavily here, but when I was in college, I did a semester abroad in the United Kingdom. Every evening I would wait for a call from my girlfriend back in Ohio after she got off work. During that time I must have played the main campaign and every War Room mission of Advance Wars at least two or three times.

I have such fond memories of the game. It was during a time in my life when the Game Boy Advance was the only gaming system I had, and aside from Mario Kart: Super Circuit and A Link to the Past, it was Andy, Max, Sami and Nell who kept me company. This December, I look forward to those same characters keeping me company again while that same girlfriend (now my wife) and I care for our third child. The arrival date of our new little CO is about two weeks before the game's release.
— ADAM RENARD

You'll get a bit more time to enjoy your newborn now that the release date for Re-Boot Camp has been pushed back a few months, but congrats in advance for expanding your home army!

My first exposure to Advance Wars was on the playground at school; several of us huddled around a singular Game Boy Advance SP watching the red and blue sprites fire rockets and machine guns on the backlit LED screen while wind whipped and balls were flung around us. The game looked lively and cute and fun.

At cross country meets one of my teammates would bring Dual Strike and we'd take turns playing multiplayer with Fog of War.

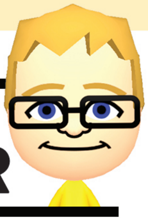
The first version I owned was Days of Ruin after reading about it in Nintendo Power. The tone was different, but the game was still the same. Unfortunately I lost that copy before I could beat it. I did find a used copy of Black Hole Rising, beat it, and fortunately haven't lost it (yet). **— PATRICK CHIN CHEONG**

Advance Wars was the game me and my friends would play all the time in high school — we bought the four-way Link Cable just for that! Unfortunately I only played the first two due to not having a DS until much later.

I feel that making some improvements or adding additional content like new missions, but sticking to the original formula, is perfectly fine when it comes to remakes.

It's a long shot, but I'd love to see WayForward tackle some old computer games like Commander Keen or Jazz Jackrabbit. Give it that WayForward polish! **— TODD EVANS**

CARTER'S CORNER



Hello again!

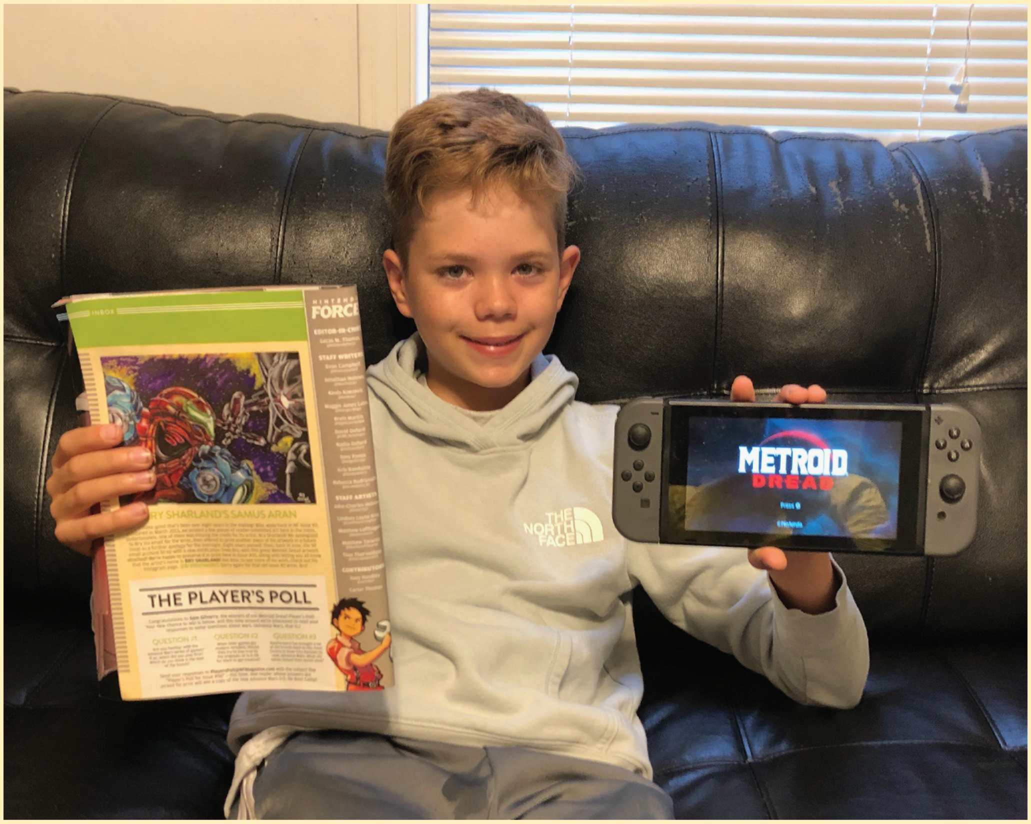
Last time I asked you all to guess when my birthday is, and how old I'm going to be. Answer: It's November 6, and I'm going to be 10! Did you get it right?

I also asked you to guess my favorite video game, which might have been easier. It's actually Bowser's Fury! Also, in this issue, I get to write about Bowser's Fury!

And today, my Dad wanted me to talk about the strategy game, chess! OK! I really like this game. I play it a lot with my Dad and my brother Calvin and my Mom. Sometimes I even beat my Dad!

The object of the game is to get your opponent's king. There are different pieces you can move to get the other king. First are the pawns. You have eight of them. They can only move forward, but they can only attack diagonally. Your bishops can move diagonally, and your rooks can move forward, backward and sideways. The queen is like a bishop and a rook put together, and knights have a really funny way of moving. My Dad's going to write about that in this issue!

But now it's quiz time! How many Ultimate Challenges have I beat in both Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle and Donkey Kong Adventure? Find out next time! (I'll make a Mario Maker course for the right answer!)



CELEBRATING SAM & SAMUS

For our Metroid Dread-themed Player's Poll, 13-year-old Sam Gilvarry wrote in to the Inbox with a detailed letter responding to all three questions. It was too good not to print! And since his letter was chosen to be printed, his name was entered into the drawing to win a copy of Metroid Dread itself. In his letter, Sam said, "I really want this game and I hope I get it when it launches!!!" – well, his wish came true! Sam's been guiding Samus through the dark depths of Planet ZDR ever since Dread's launch day. Here he is celebrating his victory after claiming his prize! If you want to win, too, you know what to do: Answer the Poll questions in every issue!

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Kye Byllesby**, the winner of our Advance Wars Player's Poll! Your new chance to win is below, and this time around we're interested to read your responses to some questions about Pokémon Legends: Arceus!

QUESTION #1

When playing an adventure or RPG, what kind of time period do you prefer the story to take place in: the past, the present or the future?

QUESTION #2

The Pokémon games have introduced a variety of different settings over the years. Which region of the Pokéworld is best?

QUESTION #3

Starter picks! For the Diamond & Pearl remakes, will you pick Turtwig, Piplup or Chimchar? And for Legends: Rowlet, Cyndaquil or Oshawott?

Send your responses to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #57" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win the new Pokémon Legends: Arceus when it arrives in January!

NINTENDO FORCE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Lucas M. Thomas
@NintendoForce

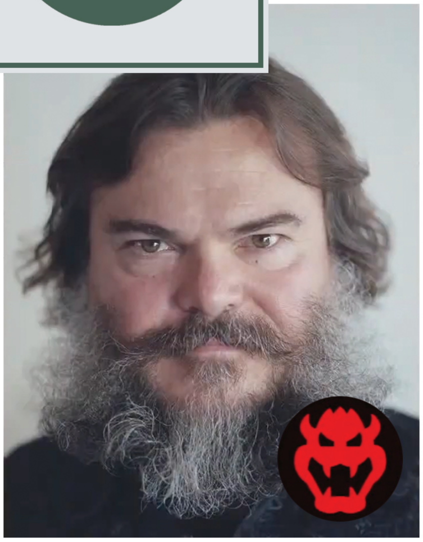
STAFF WRITERS
Evan Campbell
@evancampbell
Jonathan Holmes
@NonTrotski
Kevin Knezevic
@kevknez
Maggie Jones Lutey
@AvengerMags
Brett Martin
@NightramVGMM
David Oxford
@LBD_Nytetrayn
Nadia Oxford
@nadiaoxford
Tony Ponce
@megaStryke
Kris Randazzo
@GeekadeKris
Rebecca Rudranath
@strawbecky_81

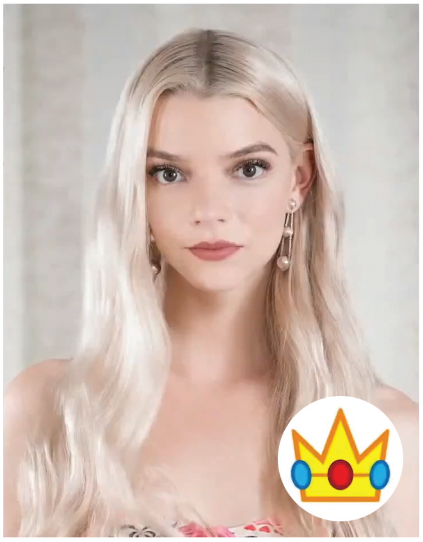
STAFF ARTISTS
John-Charles Holmes
@Sonic9jct
Lindsey Layne King
@LuminousLungKey
Matthew Loffhagen
@kotorcomics
Matthew Taranto
@MatthewPTaranto
Thor Thorvaldson
@thormeister1971

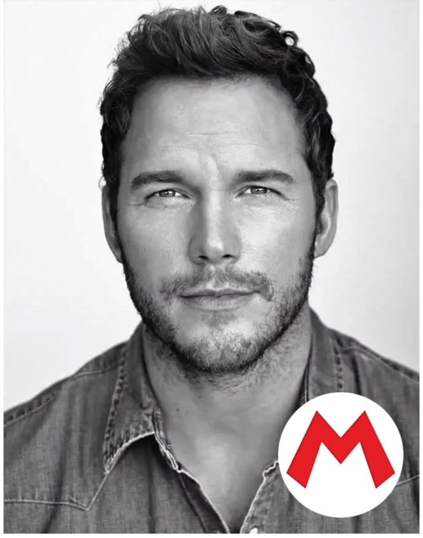
CONTRIBUTORS
Carter Thomas

COMIC BY JONATHAN HOLMES

3D N.S.A.F. MODEL BY TROFAID







Meet the Voices of the Mario Movie

"It's-a me, Andy from Parks & Recreation!"

ADVENTURING, KART RACING, golfing, partying – you name it, Mario can make it a hit.

Except for movies! The silver screen has long been the platforming plumber's kryptonite. His name just doesn't have the same draw in Hollywood as it does at GameStop. So how can Mario overcome this challenge? With the help of Hollywood "superstars!"

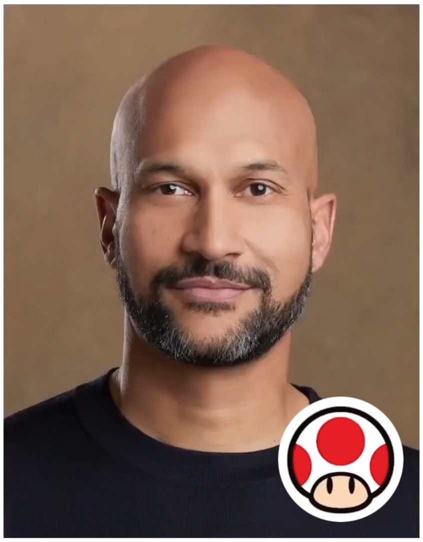
At first, some of these picks may seem bizarre, or even a little desperate, but in their own ways, they all make sense. Chris Pratt, famous for the Jurassic World and Guardians of the Galaxy film franchises, is expressive without being a "big" personality. He's an everyman, just like Mario. Anya Taylor-Joy as Peach also adds up. She's played Magik (The New Mutants) and Brea (The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance); two regal, superpowered women. And though it doesn't matter as much for an animated film, she certainly looks the part, with piercing eyes that belie a shrewd intellect.

And speaking of looking the part, Jack Black for Bowser is an inspired choice. While he's not quite the movie star he once was, in recent years he's found a new audience on TikTok and YouTube, playing games with his kids and playing up the "an old out-of-touch Dad" persona. And does anyone do cartoonish, intense-but-absurd rage better than Black? I don't think so!

Rounding out the supporting cast is Charlie Day as Luigi, Keegan-Michael Key as Toad and Seth Rogen as Donkey Kong; three comedians whose track records speak for themselves. Day, who co-starred alongside Pratt in The LEGO Movie, knows how to blend neurotic anxiety with relatable charm. Rogen, known for playing slackers and slobs, will fit right in as a relaxed, naked ape in a tie. And Key, most famous for Comedy Central's Key & Peele, is sure to bring a big personality to Peach's screeching underling.

Also confirmed are Kevin Michael Richardson as Kamek, Fred Armisen as Cranky Kong and Sebastian Maniscalco as Spike. (From Wrecking Crew!)

But what about Charles Martinet, Mario's voice actor since 1992? He'll be in the movie too, but the details remain a secret. Let's hope he gets to play "Video Game Mario" in some sort of Mario-verse crossover scene, featuring Bob Hoskins Mario, Captain Lou Mario and all the other Marios from the last 40 years! **– JONATHAN**



> This is a cool thing to see, but charging $49.99 for the 3-Button controller seems a bit steep, even if it is wireless and has added Capture and Home Buttons on top. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say Retro-Bit might have some sort of exclusivity locked up on 6-Button controllers outside of Japan, hence the Genesis Mini controllers being the 3-Button version as well. That said, there is a little mystery here, as the 3-Button version is shown to have the 6-Button's "Mode" button that toggled its functionality between 3- and 6-Button controls – a curious inclusion, indeed.
> **– DAVID**

The Spoils of War!

Nintendo's just rubbing it in Sega's face at this point.

IT IS A legend no one will forget . . . (Especially as long as Console Wars books, documentaries, etc. are around.)

Throughout the first half of the '90s, Nintendo and Sega were the fiercest of rivals. "Genesis Does What Nintendon't" and "Nintendo Is What Genesisn't" were the battle cries on schoolyards all across America as sides were picked and battle lines were drawn, every new release a point of comparison for which side was better.

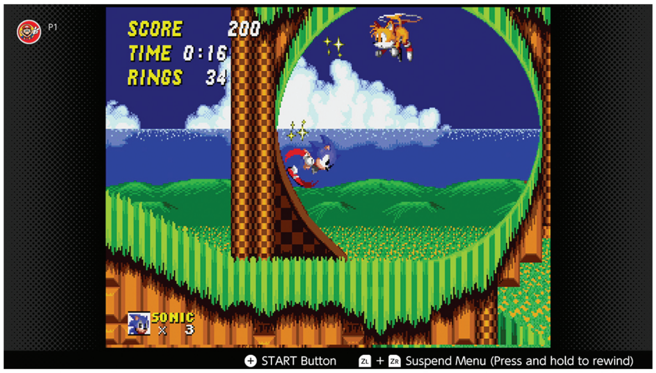
The details are too vast and varied to get into here, but suffice it to say, Nintendo was left standing in 2001 as Sega found it in their best interest to exit the console race in order to ensure their survival into the future. In a turn of events that was as sudden as it was shocking, old enmities would be buried as, over time, the two former rivals would work together with an increasing level of "never thought I'd see the day" announcements in the years to come.

Sonic the Hedgehog on the cover of Nintendo Power magazine? Never thought I'd see the day, though it only stood to reason as Sonic titles were coming to both the Game Boy Advance and GameCube. Sega Genesis (as well as TurboGrafx-16), standing proudly alongside the NES, Super NES and Nintendo 64 in the announcement of the Wii Virtual Console? Mario and Sonic shaking hands and competing in the same game – at the Olympics, no less? Sonic joining the roster of Super Smash Bros. Brawl?

Never thought I'd see the day. Or rather, days.

Now, here in 2021, Nintendo has just added both Nintendo 64 and Sega Genesis games to the Nintendo Switch Online service (with a new pricing tier; see Page 13). And as with the NES and Super NES, they've also released special Switch-compatible wireless controllers for both.

That's right: Nintendo is now selling an official Sega Genesis controller designed specifically to work with Nintendo hardware. The 3-Button in the West, to be precise, while Japan gets the 6-Button version. Never thought I'd see the day! **– DAVID**



Fangamer Meets Mega Man

The Capcom collabs continue with cool new plushes and pins.

IT SEEMS LIKE every video game merchandise shop has some sort of Mega Man offering these days, but not all of it is special or unique. Enter Fangamer, which added four pieces of Blue Bomber bling to its ever-growing expanse of amazing products!

First up is a Servbot plush that stands 10 inches tall and comes with a magnetic plate of curry to hold for $29. Next up is a great $12 Met pin – the iconic "Hard Hat" enemy. The pin has it hiding, then popping up from under its hard hat with a movable piece! Another pin features Dr. Wily in his UFO escape ship that opens to reveal his sinister scowl. Last but not least, a $59 hoodie emblazoned with Dr. Wily's signature logo on a skull with various gears and gadgetry. Get Equipped with any or all of them!

What's in the Box?

A miniature Super Mario 64 celebration, of course!

LEGO HAS JUST released a Super Mario set that lies outside of the regular LEGO Super Mario line, but is still compatible with it. This is a Question Block set that folds out to reveal scenes from Super Mario 64! It was released on October 1 and has – get this – 2,064 pieces.

Peach's Castle, Bob-omb Battlefield, Cool Cool Mountain and Lethal Lava Land are featured on the top, and a Bowser boss level is hidden on the bottom. The Peach's Castle scene has a little Lakitu and a three-block Mario "figure" with a little mustache. It's amazing they were able to capture that in such a little model, and it's really the entire charm of the piece in three blocks. Peach is also unmistakable, if not abstract. There are even little paintings in the castle! Bob-omb Battlefield features King Bob-omb atop the winding mountain, and you can spot the Chain Chomp and cannons on there as well. Cool Cool Mountain has penguins to throw off cliffs – you monster – and a hidden slide inside the mountain. Lethal Lava Land has a Bully, a Mr. I and even features that blasted Bowser slide puzzle and a Super Star to nab! The mini Bowser is my favorite part of the whole thing and isn't even found on the product page.

Many Easter eggs are waiting to be found in this $170 set, and I really think they picked the most iconic and memorable scenes from the game. My only nitpick is the fact that there actually were no regular Question Blocks in Super Mario 64! I get that the block is synonymous with the Mario universe, but why not go with Super Mario Bros. scenes instead and save the Super Mario 64 scenes for a red Exclamation Block? It could have been a whole line! Oh well.

BY BRETT MARTIN

amiibo UPDATE

DID YOU GRAB the Metroid Dread two-pack? They seemed to be hard to get!

The latest (and final!) Super Smash Bros. Ultimate Direct inevitably brought more amiibo news! We generally knew that each of the fighters would eventually get the amiibo treatment, and the Direct reinforced that. Mr. Sakurai showed the render for Steve and Alex from Minecraft, and news has dropped that they will be sold both separately and as a two-pack. He also said the sculpt is "very Steve," whatever that means.

Sephiroth, Pyra, Mythra and Kazuya were also each announced officially in the line. I think we can all assume that Pyra and Mythra will be a two-pack.

Sora would be the last official Smash Bros. amiibo, as they likely won't add more "Player 2s" or appearance changes like my precious Link Between Worlds Zelda. A pose for Sora was released shortly after the Direct, and the implications of Nintendo producing a figure that has the Mickey Mouse icon on a keychain on the Keyblade must have made some licensors' heads explode.

So where does amiibo go after Smash Bros.? The Monster Hunter series of amiibo may be wrapping up too, so it's entirely possible that amiibo will end in 2022 or 2023. But with the exceptional popularity of the brand and most of the individual figures, I'd be surprised if they just drop it. Having a figure of everyone in Smash Bros. (and more!) was a longtime dream of mine before the word amiibo even entered into the universe, so to see it now being fully realized is definitely a dream come true!

Want to Hug a Ghost?

Build-a-Bear summoned forth Build-a-Gengar.

WHO BETTER TO promote Build-a-Bear's Halloween festivities than Gengar? The iconic Ghost- and Poison-type 'mon released as an online exclusive in early September, so it was clear it was meant to get into fans' hands before the big frightfest. Gengar came with an exclusive Poké Ball-patterned coat (which honestly looks more like a kimono or robe on the big purple ghoul). It was also bundled with a 5-in-1 sound chip featuring Gengar saying its name with various inflections in a generally menacing and mischievous way. The plush and all its accoutrements costs $56, as most of the Pokémon characters end up being larger than other Build-a-Bear offerings. While Gengar stands 12 inches tall, it's also quite wide. With Umbreon being added not too long ago, the Build-a-Bear Pokémon plush family is really shaping up! I'm just surprised the line is regulated to online exclusivity, as the monsters tend to turn people's heads while out shopping.

Unfortunately, the Gengar plush is already sold out, and its prices in the secondary market are steadily rising as we speak. Chances for a restock are low, since Gengar, while popular, isn't on the same level as, say, Pikachu, but one can always hope. Just remember that when these special characters are announced, you need to act quickly! If you managed to get one, congratulations!

Songs of the Sky

Skyward Sword's full soundtrack soars into view.

FOR FANS OF complete, official soundtracks for Nintendo properties, offerings tend to be few and far between. The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword soundtrack is one of the series' best, but for years we never had a complete soundtrack; only a sound selection was released. This set, though, contains 187 tracks from the game on five discs! There is a regular edition, but the First Press Limited Edition comes with a little music box that plays "Ballad of the Goddess," as well as special packaging.

Because this is so amazing, it will of course only be sold in Japan, where cool things come from. Nippon Columbia is releasing the sets for around $50 for the regular and around $80 for the limited in late November. Time to start searching your favorite import shop or shopping proxy!

Castlevania Plans a Resurrection

Konami's seeking developers to revive its other dormant properties as well!

KONAMI HAS BEEN in hot water with their fans at least as far back as the company's uncomfortable separation with Hideo Kojima in 2015. In subsequent years, titles like Metal Gear Survive and Contra: Rogue Corps marked the lowest points in their respective series – even eFootball 2022, the latest in the once-respected Pro Evolution Soccer franchise, became the worst-rated game on Steam a mere one day after release! Is this the end of a gaming titan? Or perhaps the dark before a shining comeback?

Game site VGC recently received anonymous intel that Konami is planning to revive some of its biggest brands. This follows an internal restructure earlier this year that consolidated their production departments, which pundits at first thought meant the company was stepping away from video games, but in fact was a move to improve focus on their key properties.

According to the insiders, several Silent Hill titles are in the works at multiple external studios, while a reimagined Castlevania is being handled internally with some outside support. The juiciest rumors concern remasters of several Metal Gear Solid titles leading up to a Virtuos-developed remake of Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater. Virtuos, as you may recall, was responsible for Switch ports of The Outer Worlds, BioShock: The Collection and others, offering hope that this new Snake Eater could slither its way onto Nintendo's hybrid slate.

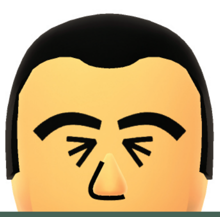
Konami also desires to give attention to other franchises that haven't seen sunlight in many years, albeit in a more indirect fashion. The Action & Shooting Game Contest, a collaboration between Konami and Shueisha Game Creators Camp, challenges indie developers to conceive sequels, remakes or even full genre reinventions of classic Konami wares. Entrants may source from any of 80 games, including Ganbare Goemon (a.k.a. Mystical Ninja), Yie Ar Kung-Fu, Gradius, Star Soldier and TwinBee series entries, as well as a pool of single-entry titles.

The grand prize winner will receive a cool 2,000,000 yen (~$18,000), while five runners-up will walk away with a more modest 57,300 yen (~$515). However, if Konami elects to commercialize a submission, the company will offer an additional prize of 30,000,000 yen (~$270,000), plus supervision and promotion to aid in full development. The contest kicked off on September 30 and will run through January 6, 2022, so interested parties better get cracking at their keyboards!

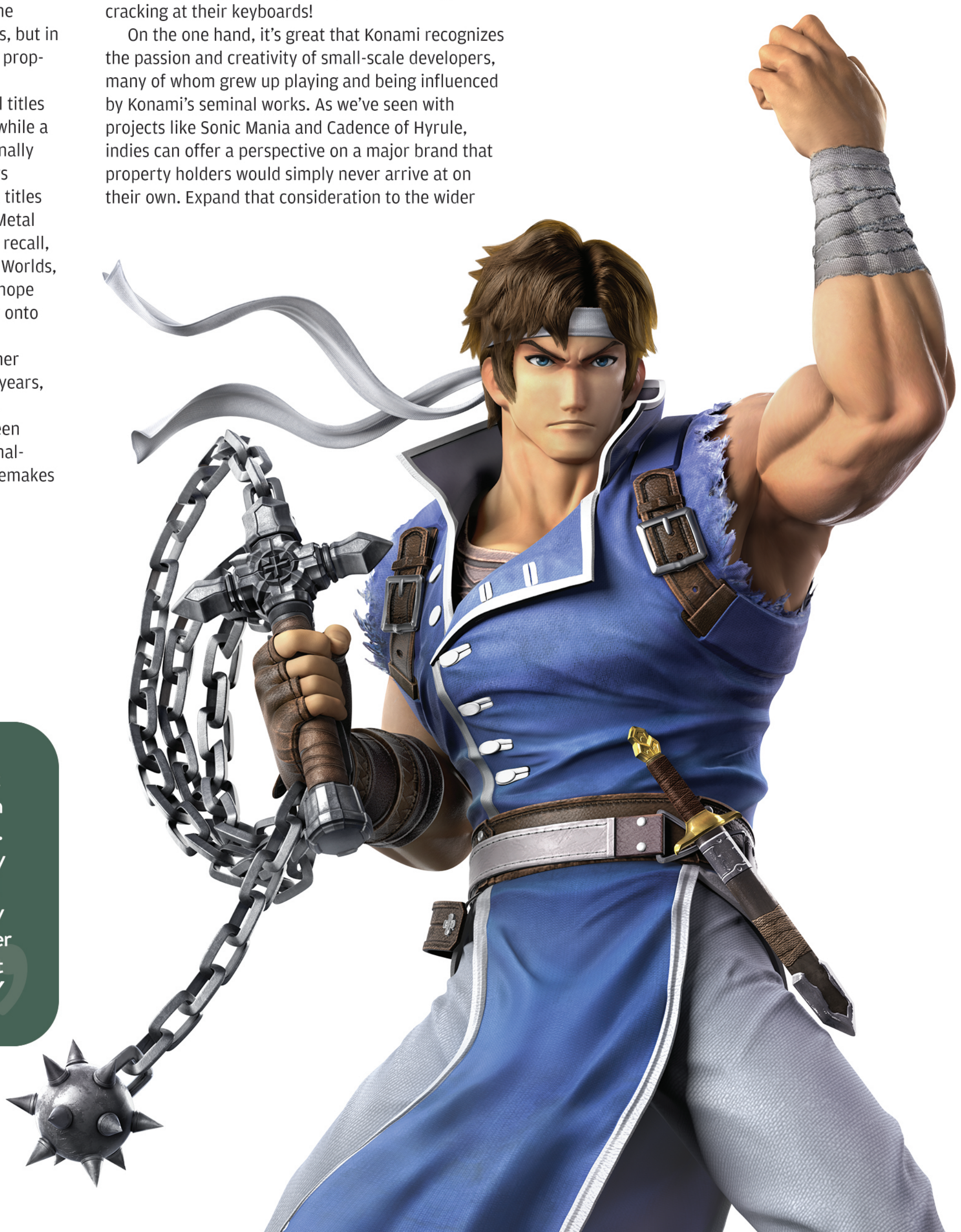
On the one hand, it's great that Konami recognizes the passion and creativity of small-scale developers, many of whom grew up playing and being influenced by Konami's seminal works. As we've seen with projects like Sonic Mania and Cadence of Hyrule, indies can offer a perspective on a major brand that property holders would simply never arrive at on their own. Expand that consideration to the wider fan game community, and you're looking at a massive talent pool poised to breathe new life into our childhood favorites.

On the other, more cynical hand, is Konami so bereft of new ideas that they have to turn the pitch process into a contest just to add to their catalog? Rather than studying the independent scene and approaching promising teams directly with a proposition, they're asking the community to do all the heavy lifting without any guarantee of recompense.

Konami hopes to raise their reputation out of the gutter, but it remains to be seen if any of these plans will bear fruit. Only time – and incredible patience – will tell. **– TONY**



"I'm extremely disheartened that Rocket Knight doesn't appear on the list of contest-eligible games. What do I gotta do to see my boy Sparkster back in action? But if I can't have that, I can at least pray for a new Goemon – a kaiju battler in which you command the giant robot Impact, perhaps? – TONY"

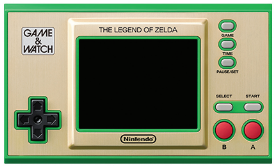


FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

WE'LL BE FULLY immersed in autumn once the calendar flips into November . . . seems like a perfect time for a summertime story, right? Blue Reflection: Second Light is the latest in a line of games proving the powerful position of the Switch in the industry right now, as it's arriving for Nintendo gamers on November 9 even though the first Blue Reflection never came to any Big N system! Read more on Page 52.

ANYONE WHO'S STILL in the mood for spooky stories full of demons and monsters a few weeks after Halloween has come and gone would do well to take a look at the long-awaited Shin Megami Tensei V when it drops on November 12. This was one of the first games announced for the Switch, and it's finally ready for action after all these years!



YOUR LATEST REMINDER of the dangers of going alone will arrive November 12 as well, as The Legend of Zelda is relaunched in portable Game & Watch form. This tiny Triforce-fueled trinket also includes Zelda II: The Adventure of Link, the original Game Boy version of Link's Awakening and a new version of Vermin, a Game & Watch classic from 40 years ago. Go smash some pots and find $49.99 worth of Rupees to buy this one!

YOUR RETURN FLIGHT to the Sinnoh region has been booked for November 19! You just need to choose whether you'd like to fly on a Shining Pearl airplane or a Brilliant Diamond jet. Then you need to pick Chimchar, Turtwig or Piplup to be your Poké partner! Decisions, decisions. Maybe a final preview on Page 50 will help you make your mind up?

WHEN YOU THINK of December, think of Disney! The Switch is getting another encore appearance from a previous 3DS release on December 3: Disney Magical World 2. Now labeled as the "Enchanted Edition," this easygoing adventure will whisk you away to a world of Disney whimsy, filled with characters like Mickey Mouse, Olaf, Peter Pan and both Beauty *and* the Beast. To learn more, turn to Page 53!

IT'S BEEN FIVE years since we last saw the Disney Magical World series in action, but that's nothing compared to its neighbor that's also being brought back on December 3: The doors of the Big Brain Academy have been closed for 14 years! Brain vs. Brain has reopened enrollment at long last, thankfully. Flip on to Page 49 for more on this one.

The 3DS is far enough away in the rearview mirror at this point that the Switch seems to fully be embracing its dual role as both Nintendo's portable platform successor and its current home console. I mean, a DS remake, a 3DS remaster and a revival of a DS series all grouped together to complete the last chunk of the holiday season lineup? It's a good time to be a fan of the Nintendo portable library from a few years ago. — LUCAS

WITH THE DLC for Super Smash Bros. Ultimate finally complete, this side section of the Forecast can finally focus on other games' expansions! First to step into the just-vacated spotlight is Animal Crossing: New Horizons, which is getting a DLC addition called Happy Home Paradise.

Back in 2015, we got a standalone Animal Crossing spin-off called Happy Home Designer on the 3DS. Its gameplay focused on designing dream homes for animal clients: They'd give you a brief description of the kind of decor they were hoping for, along with a handful of must-include furniture pieces, and you'd set to work letting your creativity flow to fill in the rest of an empty home. Your efforts could even extend to the outdoors as you did landscaping and yard decoration to support your interior design, too!

All of that same gameplay is now back — but rather than being shuffled off to become its own Switch game, Happy Home Paradise has (wisely) been attached to the juggernaut sales success of New Horizons. With this DLC added to your game, you'll have the new option to "go to work" on a Dodo Airlines flight, then you'll land in a new archipelago full of spots just waiting to host dream vacation homes for your clients. Even better, the more in-depth decorating options you learn while working there will then be able to be used back on your home island!

Happy Home Paradise drops November 5 as standalone DLC for $24.99. Or you can get it for free if you upgrade your Nintendo Switch Online subscription with the new Expansion Pack — that'll run you $49.99 a year (or $79.99 for the family plan), and will also enable access to the new Nintendo 64 and Sega Genesis virtual game libraries. Which will you choose?

It Takes Monsters to Stop Monsters

WayForward and 13AM Games present city-stomping kaiju chaos in Dawn of the Monsters!

THE OLD ADAGE says that you should fight fire with fire. If that holds true, then doesn't it only make sense to fight giant, city-stomping monsters with giant, city-stomping monsters?

OK, so the city-stomping part might be flawed, but the rest of the logic is pretty sound. Which is why, when giant, city-stomping monsters known as the Nephilim begin attacking locations around the world ranging from Egypt to Canada, Japan and beyond, it's up to the forces of D.A.W.N. (a.k.a. the Defensive Alliance Worldwide Network) to stop them in their tracks.

But as we just alluded to, D.A.W.N.'s methods are not exactly what you might consider conventional. This state-of-the-art organization will deploy its agents (that's you) to stop these towering terrors before they wreak too much havoc on the world. But instead of utilizing tanks, jets or helicopters, you'll be controlling one of four uniquely capable titans in service of the people of Earth.

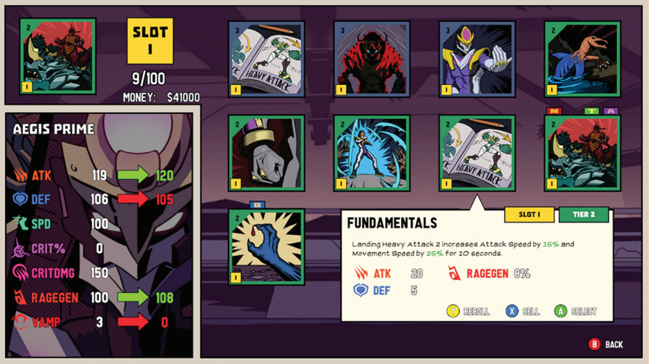
These four include the Ultraman-like superhero Aegis Prime, the long-range lightning mech Tempest Galahad, the minion-summoning crustacean colossus Ganira and, finally, the lizard with the fiery breath known as Megadon, who looks like a true king of the monsters. Each of these gallant goliaths has their own unique abilities and Rage skills, some of which can even inflict elemental status effects on those woeful enough to cross their paths. With the meter charged up, they'll even be able to perform some Cataclysm attacks and finishing moves (just remember to turn your back toward any explosions that ensue; you'll look *way* cooler that way).

And if all else fails? Grab something from the environment around you and just beat them over the head with it until they're sorry! (Repeat as needed.) The art of Environmental Combat is multifaceted, though, but fortunately, Nintendo Force has the scoop on how to make the most of your surroundings and score that lovely S+ ranking.

Environmental elements come in three delicious flavors in Dawn of the Monsters: Structures, Weapons and Hazards. Structures are themselves divided into three classes: small, medium and large. These can range from anything like a boulder to a low-rise building to a major landmark.

Small structures are, well, small. At least, relatively speaking. These include things like trees, small buildings and highways. (Sure, they seem pretty big to you and me, but will nevertheless have to be scraped off the foot of your chosen monster should they happen to trample on by.)

Medium structures are where things get interesting. Boulders, obelisks, that low-rise where noisy neighbors won't keep it down on a Friday night. These take a little more work to destroy, and doing so can help build up your Rage Meter (so watch out the next time you block half the street for one of your little impromptu parties, *Jared*). Alternatively, you can pick them up with a tap of the B



Button, allowing you to swing it with Y or X, or chuck it across the map at an enemy with another tap of B (better let them know you'll be late for work on Monday, *Francis*).

There's more to medium-sized structures, though. Some Nephilim are difficult to stun, but beaning them between the eyes with a boulder from Colorado should do the trick nicely. It might even knock them into the air, or let you get in a good light or heavy combo! They might also have Nephilim bulbs growing out of them, which you can grab for a quick power-up!

Then there are the large structures, which consist almost exclusively of high-rise skyscrapers. The bad news is that these are too big for you to grab. The *good* news is that many of your enemies aren't, so naturally, the solution is to throw them into the structures instead! (Hey, you do what you gotta do.) This can result in the flying foes bouncing back and right into a combo, or you might even just be able to throw an enemy *through* them, resulting in even more damage! Oh, and you can also just smash them to build up Rage, if that's how you roll. (Hope they're insured.)

Beyond the wide world of structures, there are also Weapons. These are quick and limited in use, and while you *can* throw them, they often have special effects attached to them that make for better alternative uses. For example, take that electrical tower over there (we'll wait) and whack an enemy with it to get some *shocking* results. Why use a missile *launcher* for a ranged attack when you can use a missile *truck?* And so forth.

Finally, there are Hazards. These are parts of the environment, such as volcanoes, lightning strikes and tidal waves, that can harm your opponents, but can also harm you just as easily, so watch yourself. Make sure that when these dangers are at their height, your opponent is there and you're not. Spatial awareness is key.

There will be lots of damage to be done throughout the game's 35 missions as you (and a buddy in two-player co-op, if you like) flatten hordes of enemies, wipe out their nests and smash enormous bosses, then use the DNA Augments you've earned to bolster your own stats and abilities.

OK, aspiring D.A.W.N. agent, do you feel sufficiently prepped by this primer? You won't have to wait much longer before taking command of these kaiju yourself, as WayForward and 13AM Games are working to finish Dawn of the Monsters soon. Look for it to land in the Switch eShop in 2022, and keep an eye out for extra advance info in upcoming NF issues! **— DAVID**

KING OF THE KAIJU
MEGADON

What Mario is to most of the games he appears in, Megadon is to Dawn of the Monsters. He's the standard-bearer. The all-arounder. The monster against which all others are judged, balancing offense and defense, ranged and melee attacks so that he can handle any situation.

Megadon was the first Nephilim to appear when the invasion began in 2036, emerging from his volcanic lair and showing tremendous aptitude in laying out other Nephilim with his exceptional power and skill. Though formidable, he was willing to be recruited by D.A.W.N., and now he works on their side to protect the world!

To call Megadon hot-blooded would be an understatement; magma courses through his veins, granting him the ability to superheat his body with a move simply called Flex, which buffs his attacks, and can be stacked up to three times, increasing his damage output up to 52% briefly. Attacking him in this state can immediately maximize his attack buffs in what's known as a Flex Parry. Another move too hot for anyone else to handle is Magma Eruption, which sees Megadon leap skyward and slam the ground with his fists, giving rise to a volcanic explosion that sends enemies flying away from him. Not only is this move great for crowd control, but it's also a great lead-in to . . . Heat Breath! What would a giant bipedal lizard stomping through downtown be without it? Fire spews forth from Megadon's massive maw, hitting enemies multiple times for high damage, juggling them and inflicting the BURN ailment upon them, continuing to damage them over time.

Finally, Megadon's "Volcanic Ignition" Cataclysmic Attack can damage multiple enemies when he punches the ground to generate a massive fire tornado that draws in foes before shredding and tossing them.

Of course, these are just the tip of the iceberg for what the fiery Megadon can do, as DNA Augments can make him even mightier!

The Ultimate Smash Chapter Ends

With Ultimate's final DLC addition revealed, we shift into the Smash Bros. off-season.

AND SO WE'VE arrived at the end.

Sora from the Kingdom Hearts series has soared into the roster of Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, and in doing so he's completed not just the full set of fighters for Fighters Pass Vol. 2, but also the paid DLC for the game as a whole. There will probably still be small additions to Ultimate in the months and years to come – fresh Spirit Events promoting new releases will likely still be a thing for a while yet – but as far as major content expansions go, it looks like this chapter of the Smash saga has closed.

. . . Which means speculation for the next Smash is now open!

As longtime readers have learned about me already by now, I love to imagine what might happen in the future. Big reveals are great – Sora's was incredible, and emotionally impactful for millions of players – but there's always a loss that accompanies each confirmed addition, and that's the fact that once something is known, and concrete, and fixed in time, we can't enjoy the fun of not knowing what it will be any more. Luckily, even though there's no more dreaming to be done about the playable character lineup in Ultimate, the "off-season" we're now entering offers its own array of possibilities to ponder.

In this in-between time after the most recent Smash has wrapped but before the next sequel has been revealed, we can imagine about the very nature of what that sequel will have in store for us! So, let's go ahead and get that ball rolling, shall we? It's never too early!

There really seem to be only two ways forward for Smash: going even bigger, or going back to basics. The first option would see Ultimate used as a foundation to build upon even further – Everyone would be Here once again, but then more characters and stages would keep getting layered on top of the already-excessive total. I'd like that, but it seems less likely than the alternative:

A Smash Bros. reboot. I'm in the camp that thinks this off-season will be used by Nintendo to reassess the Smash series with the aim of rebuilding it back with its next installment. That would likely mean large content cuts, which could be received negatively, but many of the old characters really need total overhauls at this point. (How long is Mario going to use F.L.U.D.D. from 2002? Come on.)

Either approach would be interesting, and there are arguments to be made for the merits of both. The only non-debatable thing? Mr. Sakurai needs to take a nap, now! **– LUCAS**

REVIEWS

Sora Unlocked at Last!

SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE: CHALLENGER PACK 11

IF THE PREVIOUS Super Smash Bros. Ultimate addition, Kazuya, was a love letter to the co-developers of the game, Sora is most definitely a final parting shot for its ravenous fans.

During Masahiro Sakurai's live reveal and walkthrough of the final *final* fighter, it was revealed that this optimistic Kingdom Hearts protagonist actually took the top spot in 2015's character poll. It seemed like an impossibility that this highly requested contender could actually make it into Smash, since Sora's inclusion would require concentrated collaboration from both Square Enix *and* Disney.

But, as luck would have it, a chance elevator encounter between Sakurai and a Disney employee would kickstart the conversation to make this fevered dream a reality. Considering this is eerily close to how the concept of Kingdom Hearts even got conceived in the first place, it almost feels like Sora was fated to join all along . . .

So now that he's here, is Sora a fitting addition to Smash? Honestly, very much so. Sora's visual design is intentionally built to invoke the iconic imagery of Mickey Mouse, giving him a surprisingly more congruent and timeless look compared to some of the other, ahem, anime-leaning fighters in Smash. Kingdom Hearts is a series known for its masterclass animation and finely tuned combat, both of which are robustly incorporated into Sora's fighting debut here.

Sora has been designed to be extremely accessible, with a basic sword-like moveset, and little emphasis on gimmicks like stances or meters. What sets him apart, however, is his weight, or lack thereof – this boy's even lighter than Isabelle! This allows him to jump, maneuver and recover with unprecedented height and ease, meaning Sora excels at aerial combat over most. Wins don't come easy when using this master of the Keyblade, but by boiling down Smash's complex combo system to just a few easy inputs, he can become devastating in well-trained hands. Don't be surprised if we see a number of Sora mains at the next big Smash tourney, especially from first-time entrants!

Along with Sora comes a small selection of songs (no Disney tunes, though) and a stage based on a key Kingdom Hearts location, Hollow Bastion. While you won't spy Goofy or Donald in the background, the basic stage does transform during the final round to showcase stained-glass murals of other protagonists from the series. Between this and the new Spirits, there are enough references to Kingdom Hearts' infamously entangled lore to keep fans squealing with delight, while also allowing those with zero history with the franchise to just pick up the character and immediately have fun.

And that's it – Ultimate is completed, and Sakurai and his team can now enjoy a well-deserved rest. Now, like Lucas, my thoughts are already turning to the sequel. With 89 characters, where is there to go? Fill out to a full 100? Reboot with a reserved smaller selection of characters?

Who knows for sure. But after being served a veritable feast of gaming history, topping off Ultimate with an iconic character who kept fans begging for the impossible for years feels like the highest note to go out on. **– JOHN-CHARLES**

10

DLC PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPERS: NINTENDO, SORA & BANDAI NAMCO RATING: E10+

Grappling with a Short Runtime

STEEL ASSAULT

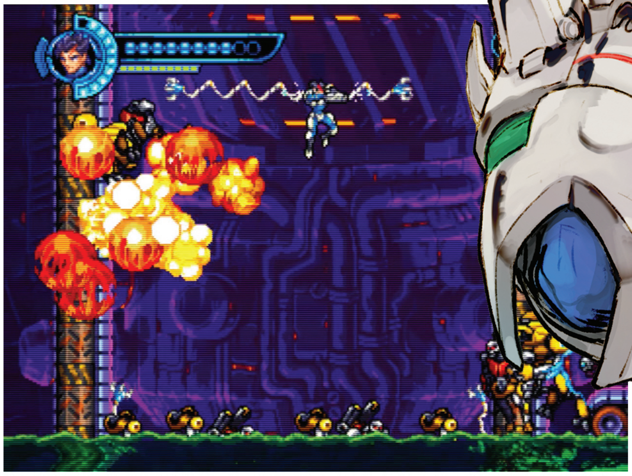
HOW LONG SHOULD a game be? If it costs $60, should it be at least 12 hours long, averaging to about $5 per hour? If so, then what about a game like Mega Man 2 that you can beat in about 30 minutes, but is so concentrated with high-octane music and engaging moments that replaying it is endlessly joyful? Is that worth $60? Maybe more?

While most games eventually come to a stop, the debates about how long games should be will never end. Keep that in mind when you consider picking up Steel Assault. Out of all the games I've played in the past year, this is the one that had me arguing with myself the most about how long a game should be.

Steel Assault starts like a classic arcade game, complete with "attract screen" – a flashy intro designed to help an arcade cabinet stand out amongst the competition. On a system like the Switch, it serves a different purpose, letting players know what they're in for: an old-fashioned "quarter muncher" on new technology. It's like a home console port of an arcade game that never existed. In real life, those kinds of ports used to save players a lot of money. Instead of emptying out your wallet over and over by paying a credit per continue, you could put all your money down up front in one big plunk, then take the whole darn game home.

The downside of that exchange is, you need mortality to value life, even if the life is virtual. In fiction, there's a reason why most immortals (like vampires or Highlanders) get pretty bored. When you have all the time in the world, none of that time really matters. Likewise, in arcade games like Steel Assault with unlimited continues, there needs to be at least one mechanic that has some serious depth to it to keep the whole thing from going stale. Not only is that the best way to prevent players from just button-mashing through every battle, but it's also great for keeping replays compelling.

A simple-but-layered gameplay loop can make every fight (or refight) against a boss – and every new playthrough of an old obstacle course – feel like a skill-building exercise. Even when you're up against a familiar challenge, you still have the potential to become a little



smarter; a little stronger in your understanding of what your player character can do.

In Steel Assault, that mechanic is the double-sided grappling hook. There's also a power slide that turns you invincible, a standard-fair double jump and an electric punch that can make enemy bullets disappear, but by far the deepest and longest learning curve in the game is attached to the hook. It can be used as a ramp. Or a ladder. Or a temporary platform – but it only works if it connects to a surface on both ends. Otherwise, it just falls apart.

These powers are pulled together by Taro Takahashi, your leading man. He's an orphan with a vendetta, and his goal is to take down the evil mastermind General Magnus Pierce and his four lieutenants. It's a pretty standard story for the genre, beautifully rendered in a style reminiscent of Captain Commando and other neo-futurist sci-fi games from the '90s, with a high-energy synth-rock soundtrack to match.

There are definitely some nostalgia strings being pulled here, but you don't need to have fond memories of the "attitude era" of games to enjoy Steel Assault. It's got plenty of memorable moments of its own. The first couple of bosses, an auto-scrolling level against a giant well of green, toxic sludge and the last battles against Magnus will all live on in my memory for a long time. And I'm sure I'll be replaying Steel Assault to relive those moments and many others over the years! I just wish there was a little more here, and that a little less of it relied on brutal difficulty to keep itself going.

As high as those high points are, they weren't enough to motivate me to go through the grueling process of truly mastering Steel Assault. After beating the game on Normal difficulty and dabbling with Arcade Mode (which takes away the infinite lives), I felt I'd had enough. The rewards for incrementally improving through trial-and-error practice just weren't worth the stress and frustration of knowing that my next death would be my last. It might be different if there were some big reward or some new content unlocks for getting through Arcade Mode, but according to the publisher, surviving that ordeal just scores you some new border/bevel art.

In the end, I can't say how long every game should be, but I can tell you that Steel Assault made me think about arcade-era design in a whole new way, and I was glued to my screen for the full 90 minutes it took me to see it through from start to finish. **– JONATHAN**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: TRIBUTE GAMES
DEVELOPER: ZENOVIA INT.
RATING: E10+

Wings on Wheels

SKATEBIRD

FROM ATARI'S 720° to Tony Hawk's Pro Skater franchise, most skateboarding sims grant you the power to do unbelievable tricks with the press of a button, all while trying to suspend your disbelief with realistic physics engines. You shouldn't go into SkateBIRD expecting any of that. I mean, why would you? The game stars a chubby bird who can literally fly (or at least, double jump)! Realism wasn't exactly the goal here.

And yet, the game feels more like your average "first year of skateboarding" experience than most others in the genre. At first, it can feel like you're banging your head against the wall, totally unable to push the story forward by completing one of the game's 90+ challenges. Then all of a sudden, it all just clicks. What seemed like an impossible task becomes easy as pie. Every kick up the halfpipe is a gamble, but when you win, you win big.

In that way, SkateBIRD feels more like a 3D platformer than a sports game, like the spirit of Super Meat Boy inhabiting the body of Super Mario 64; both bursting with energy, but every once in a while, they break. But again, that's true to real skateboarding. A stray pebble in your wheels, a sudden gust of wind, or a slight dent in the turf; all variables out of the skater's control. But part of what makes video games so wonderful is they can take those random moments that hurt in real life and make them funny, and even joyful.

That's where SkateBIRD really excels. The massive selection of playable birds, the multiple unlockables, the punk/ska/lo-fi beats soundtrack (complete with samples of passionate ornithologists lecturing about herring gulls), the five massive parks and the innocent, hypomanic story that ties it all together; it all makes even the most painful faceplant (or is it beakplant?) easy to shake off.

That said, the game's default settings are a little too daunting, even for a glutton for punishment like myself. The standard control scheme makes it extremely hard to kick up ramps. It also activates a balancing minigame every time you grind. Both are more frustrating than they're worth. Thankfully, both of these features can be fixed in the accessibility options menu.

The one glaring issue I had with the game that you can't fix is the "FANCY" meter. Once it's fully charged, you can move at top speed. Sometimes doing a few tricks fills it — but sometimes it doesn't. That wouldn't matter so much if it weren't for the fact that many of SkateBIRD's timed challenges require you to be maximum fast in order to win. It's no fun to see the clock run out because you just couldn't get "FANCY" fast enough.

Random elements can add a little bit of bite to what might otherwise be an overly sweet experience, but I know we all have different levels of tolerance for "gameplay spice." If you think that Super Smash Bros. Brawl's "1/100 chance of tripping" mechanic ruined the game, then SkateBIRD definitely isn't for you. But if you'd like to embrace a little chaos while getting wild in a virtual skatepark made of paperclips and duct tape, then we're birds of a feather, and this is a game you should flock to. **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: GLASS BOTTOM GAMES
RATING: T

Grape Expectations

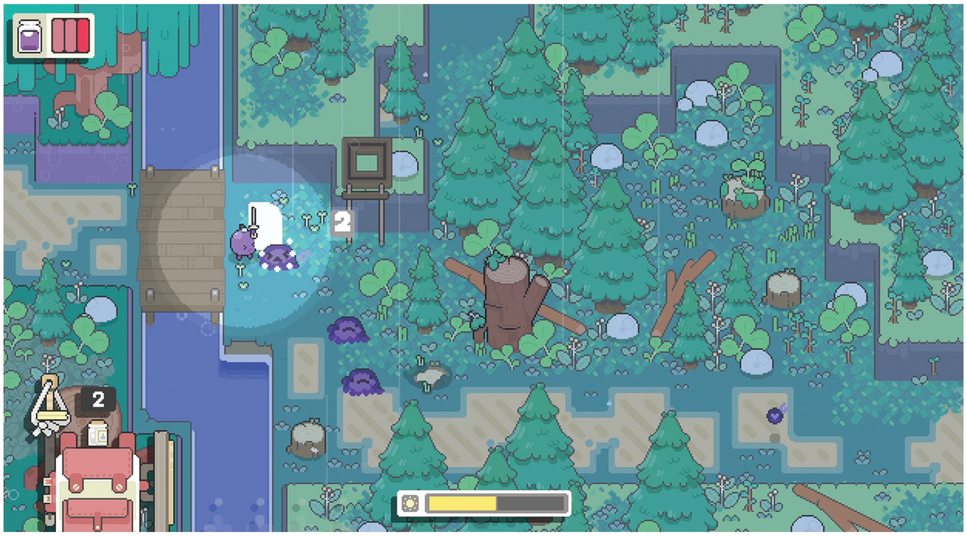
GARDEN STORY

ROSE CITY GAMES' Garden Story, which launched on Switch during the August Indie Direct, is the story of Concord, a little grape who's been tapped to unite their fellow flora against an encroaching threat to their survival. Concord and their friends are plant life, fungi, frogs and sea creatures who have been given life by the flow of enchanted Dew, and live simple lives in the four seasonally themed villages of The Grove. Concord's friend and mentor, Plum, senses something is amiss and goes off to find the root of the problem – but not before making Concord the official Guardian of Spring Hamlet.

The Grove's story is parallel to the situation our own world is facing (the developers partnered with the Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center, a group that raises awareness of climate change, to develop many of the story's themes), and it's effective without being too preachy. While Concord's mission involves dangerous battles against the destructive Rot, they're also gathering resources, fixing broken equipment and being a good neighbor.

I managed to beat the story in around 14 hours, but the pace is very laid-back. There are two or three quests you'll be given each day to fulfill, along with other tasks you'll need to complete to unlock the next story segment. There are also optional sidequests, gardening, crafting and a bunch of cosmetic hats and backpacks for Concord to buy and wear.

Daily quests can be troublesome – there were some occasions when I'd get a daily quest for an area that wasn't open to me yet – and repetitive, and it helps to hoard as many resources as possible. Adding weapon and health buffs is done by collecting pictures and memories in a little scrapbook, which was a cute addition.



Concord has a variety of harvesting tools/weapons at their disposal, each with different attack types and functions. However, going up against more than one enemy at once is risky, and not recommended if you have a small health bar. (There's an option to turn off getting squished in battle, which sends you back to your home base and ends the day.) Hopefully, by the time this issue reaches you, a patch that adds more balanced combat – as well as inventory upgrades – will be live, making some of the boss battles a lot easier.

The most charming parts of Garden Story are its music and visual style. While it's simple and pixelated, there's still a lot of detail, especially in everyone's facial features and expressions. The lighting for the different times of day really makes everything stand out, too. Out of all the tracks on the soundtrack, I love how the background music for Summer Bar puts me in an instant vacation mood, thanks to the steel drum and maracas. I would've liked to hear more variety in the tracks for the four major dungeons, though.

Garden Story's on the short side, but it has plenty of options and content to really stretch your experience toward 100% completion. It's *grape* for all ages! **– REBECCA**

7.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ROSE CITY GAMES
DEVELOPER: PICOGRAM
RATING: E10+

A Half-Genie History Lesson

SHANTAE

WITH THE WORK of WayForward standing in our spotlight for this NF edition, it's only appropriate to take a moment and look back at their most impactful original adventure (especially since it recently arrived in the Switch eShop). Working together with Limited Run Games and even well-known YouTuber and programming genius ModernVintageGamer, WayForward has revived the original Shantae game for just the second time since its Game Boy Color debut all the way back in 2002.

Shantae has established such a long legacy at this point – four full sequels and several cameos from the main character in other places, like Super Smash Bros. Ultimate – that you just know this first game must have been something truly special. That feeling is confirmed when you begin to play it, even now, nearly 20 years later, because it just seems too well made to have actually been a Game Boy Color release!

Shantae's animations, for one, are beautifully fluid (which may have influenced the designers toward having her be a belly dancer, in order to better show off what they could do to make her move so smoothly on limited hardware). Each enemy and NPC is likewise infused with a little bit of cartoon magic.

The soundtrack is instantly catchy – one of Jake Kaufman's early works – and keeps your head bopping as you run and jump along.

And the gameplay is also lovingly crafted, polished and refined . . . for the most part. Shantae, structurally, is a more purified Castlevania II: Simon's Quest: Our hero explores a fully connected sidescrolling overworld, visits towns to talk with NPCS, recover her health and buy items, then occasionally dips into dungeons where she has to navigate a maze, gain a new transformation power and ultimately battle a boss. There's even a day/night system that makes overworld foes more fierce under the light of the moon! Someone was a big Simon's Quest fan when sitting down to design this one. All of that still works and clicks when it's played again today via the Switch.

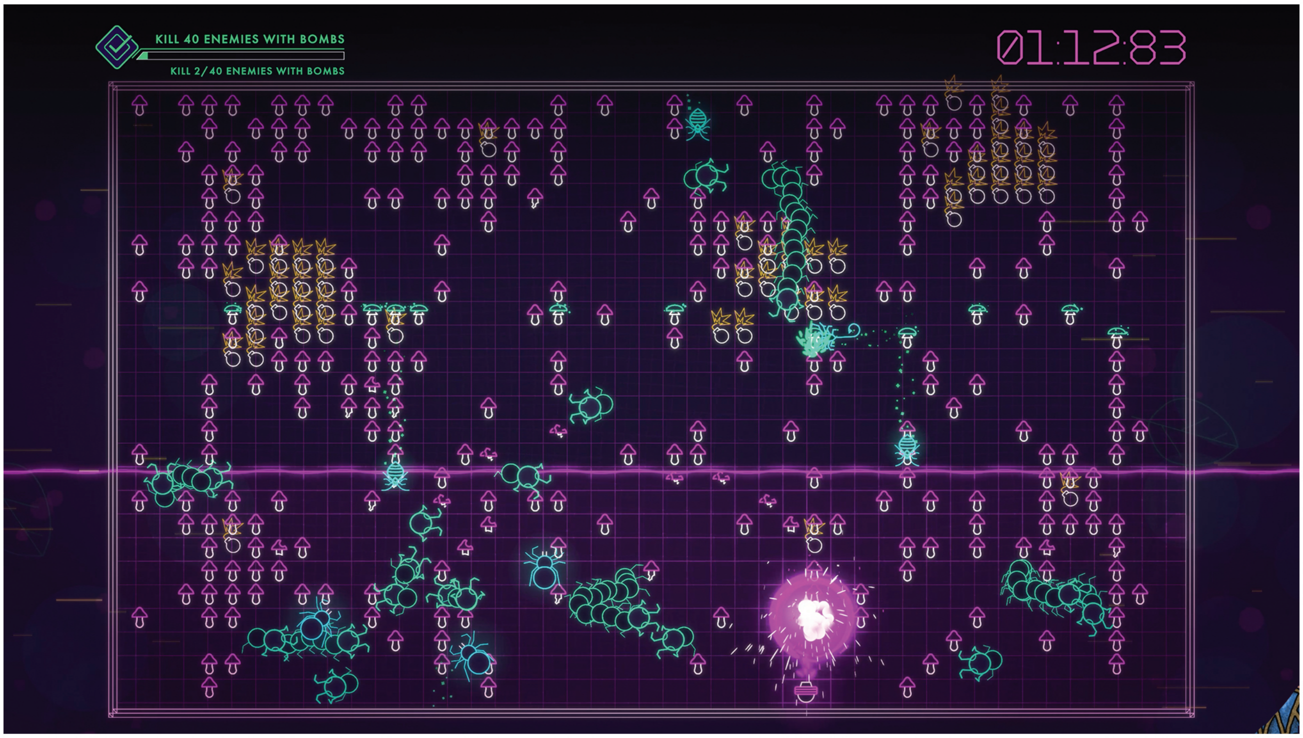
But some elements are irritating. Several enemies pop into play right on top of Shantae, forcing you to take damage and frustrating you. Your main method of attack, a hair whip with Shantae's ponytail, has a short range (that Simon Belmont never would've approved of). And with no map included in the game, it's easy to get turned around and lost, which means you'll probably need to play with a walkthrough pulled up from the internet.

The new emulator built to run the game helps mitigate some of the frustrations – being able to save at any point, then reload those saves as many times as you like, helps you avoid trips to the Game Over screen. But Limited Run's new "Carbon Engine" emulation interface doesn't go as far as others we've seen in recent years, like Nintendo Switch Online's NES/SNES solution and the one powering Konami's Castlevania collections, as there's no Rewind feature here. That has become such a nice, comfy addition to the experience of revisiting retro titles that it's hard now to not have it available when it isn't. Hopefully it'll make the cut for Limited Run's future Carbon Engine re-releases, as I know they have plans to relaunch lots of old classics in a similar manner.

From that perspective, Shantae has been kind of the guinea pig for a new emulation initiative. It isn't as in-depth as a Shantae re-release could have been, but the base game itself is still so charming that it's worth a look on Switch even without extra bells and whistles. **– LUCAS**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: WAYFORWARD DEVELOPERS: WAYFORWARD & LIMITED RUN GAMES RATING: E10+



Attack of the Insects!

CENTIPEDE: RECHARGED

FOLLOWING LAST YEAR'S Missile Command: Recharged, here comes another attempt at revitalizing one of Atari's classic brands. But while Centipede: Recharged does indeed succeed at being Centipede, it doesn't do much else.

If you're unfamiliar with the 1981 arcade classic, it's a simple premise: You control a dot-shaped avatar and you try to shoot centipede monsters as they speed across the screen. Scattered across the playfield are destructible mushrooms that act as barriers that the titular centipedes weave in and out of, and an army of other insects out to get you as well. Think Space Invaders, but way more chaotic.

But unlike Space Invaders, you don't instantly die when the enemies reach the bottom of the screen, and instead of your movements being limited to just left and right, there's a small field where you can move freely in all directions. It's a great concept that's considered a classic for a reason. It's as frantic and fun to play today as it was 40 years ago.

However, Centipede: Recharged is still troubled by the same issues that have plagued pretty much every home console version of Centipede since the Atari 2600. The screen orientation in the original release was vertical instead of horizontal, like most arcade games of the time. The switch to a horizontal layout doesn't exactly break the game, but it does fundamentally alter the way you play it, as well as how much space the enemies have to move around in.

The arcade version also used a trackball to control your character, which gave players a distinct level of maneuverability that simply isn't possible with an analog stick. That's not to say that the controls don't work here, but the entire Centipede concept worked as well as it did because of how its arcade cabinet was designed. Without the vertical screen orientation and the precision of a trackball, Centipede just isn't Centipede. Missile Command: Recharged partially overcame this by allowing touch controls in Handheld Mode, but Centipede: Recharged offers no such option.

What the game does offer are some cool new weapons that help spice things up a bit, like exploding bullets and rapid fire. They don't dramatically alter the gameplay experience, but they can be very satisfying to use.

The visuals also have a nice vector-based look to them, providing a style that's equal parts modern and throwback, harkening to some of Atari's other arcade classics like Asteroids. But the main inspiration here was clearly Bizarre Creations' Geometry Wars series, which Centipede emulates but never quite nails. Explosions and other actions lack a sense of impact. It's not bad, but the chaotic energy that makes the original so special is absent. It's hard to put my finger on exactly what's missing here, but something definitely is.

As for longevity, there are a decent number of fun "challenge" levels to work your way through. Unfortunately, once you're done with them, there's not a whole lot else to do besides just play Centipede. So it really does all come down to how much you like that original game.

Like their previous Recharged title, Atari isn't trying to reinvent the wheel here. Its back-to-basics design is limited, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't have a blast while it lasted!
– KRIS

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPERS: SNEAKYBOX & ADAMVISION STUDIOS RATING: E

6.0

Where Will the Road Take You?

ROAD 96

7.5

THE YEAR IS 1996; the place, Petria. Despite being rich in natural resources and beauty, it's ruled by a tyrannical government, and you – as a teenage runaway – are desperately trying to reach Road 96, and the border to freedom. Developed by French studio DigixArt, Road 96 is a procedurally generated road trip adventure in which your teens' journeys can change Petria's destiny.

Each journey has several encounters along the way, titled after familiar '90s songs. Some are lighthearted, where you'll be playing games or having pleasant conversations. However, many of them are tense. You'll need to talk down a cop who has their weapon trained on you and your fellow bus passengers. You'll be trapped in a car with someone with serious anger issues and revenge on the brain. You might end up shot dead mere steps away from the border, or get caught stowing away in a cargo truck. It's raw and frightening, and to some people, all too real.

When you do manage to reach the border, don't rest on your laurels – because another teen begins their journey, hopefully emboldened by your experience. Luckily, the skills you learn during every border crossing attempt – like hacking security systems, picking locks or being a quick thinker – stay with you, making each subsequent run just a little bit easier.

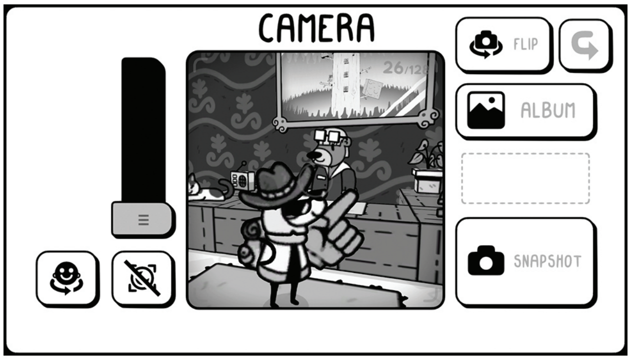
On your journeys, there are action sequences as well as dialogue trees that you'll need to navigate to proceed. The left joystick is used to look around, while the right stick is used to highlight choices or objects that need to be picked up or manipulated. Many of the choices or answers are highlighted with an icon; these are usually the ones that will influence the outcome of the final chapter: the lead-up to Petria's Election Day. There are other choices your teenager can make, both big and small: whether they save a new friend or themselves, steal someone's money with the ATM card they "found" or keep a secret from the authorities.

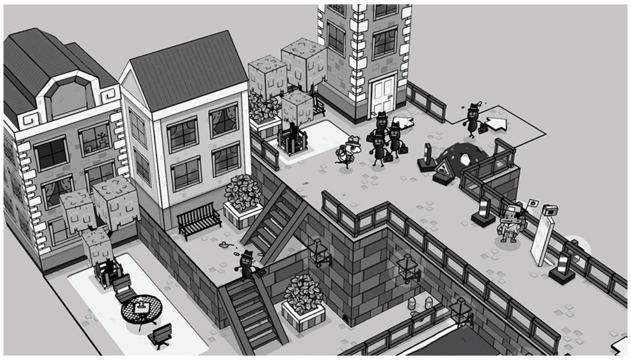
The characters you encounter are a mixed bag. Some of them I felt immediately sympathetic toward, while others I felt conflicted over, and there were a few that I just plain didn't like even after the game presented them in a more positive light – like the talk show host, Sonya, who's a childish brat to her bodyguard and news crews. Then there's Jarod, who's just plain *terrifying*. Every road trip further fleshes out the backstory of each character, but many of the connections that some characters have with others are made totally obvious during your first couple of trips – I would have liked the sense of mystery to last a little longer.

The character designs are a mix between realistic and cartoony that works for some, but not others (and once again, Jarod is *terrifying*). But the environmental graphics are a sight to behold. Petria's countryside is filled with beautiful vistas, and you'll get plenty of chances to look out the window at the scenery going by, sit by a waterfall deep in the forest or admire the starry sky in a campground. There's even a road trip soundtrack, in the form of collectable cassettes, that features lighthearted ballads as well as high-energy dance music and hard-driving synthwave.

Even if the writing and characters were somewhat weak at times, Road 96 was still a heart-pounding emotional road trip that doesn't pull any punches. You might win freedom, but what will you end up losing in the end? **– REBECCA**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: DIGIXART RATING: T





Photography Back in Focus

TOEM

9.0

AS WE GET further into fall and temperatures drop, the need for a cozy game to snuggle up with and play indoors increases. The new indie adventure game TOEM from Something We Made fits this mold perfectly!

TOEM isn't a long game, and it's not a difficult one, but it's perfect if you want to enjoy a cute, low-key gaming experience that's built around a photo mode. While many games have a photo mode as an added activity, TOEM puts it on center stage, allowing you to capture anything and everything you come across in its charming hand-drawn world.

The game starts with the young, bright-eyed protagonist preparing to set off on an adventure to see TOEM, a natural phenomenon, and snap the perfect photo of it. You're tasked with traveling through different locales to get to TOEM, including a harbor town and bustling city, and to do so, you have to use your trusty camera to help people, critters and ghosts along the way with their problems.

Interacting with each areas' inhabitants was the best part of TOEM for me.

As you travel through these places, you meet several cute residents who need your help, from a forest dweller who lost his favorite sock to a kid balloon who was separated from his balloon family on his birthday. Even though you spend a short amount of time with these characters, their delightful designs and eccentric personalities shine through.

You also have plenty of subjects to photograph via an optional compendium, and I enjoyed filling it up with photos of the sweet creatures and beautiful locales you find.

TOEM's camera mechanics work well, allowing you to easily access the camera, move it around, flip it to take selfies and zoom in and out. Later on, you get access to a tripod, and you can set it down and operate your camera from farther away, which is helpful for the more elusive subjects you come across.

I experienced a few issues while playing TOEM. The game froze a few times just before cutscenes would trigger. Restarting the game fixed this issue, and thankfully, because the game autosaves so much, I didn't lose much progress.

Another issue occurred during some photo quests, where I would submit a photo that matched the quest description, but the quest giver wouldn't accept it. I had to submit multiple photos matching the criteria before one was finally recognized as acceptable, and that got tedious.

These problems didn't impact my experience greatly, because TOEM succeeds overall in the type of experience it's creating. Its photo mode provides the freedom to get the exact shots you want, and its lovable world has no shortage of subjects to photograph who will ultimately capture your heart.

– MAGGIE

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SOMETHING WE MADE
RATING: E

All Aboard for an Epic Adventure!

EASTWARD

IN THEIR PURSUIT of pixel perfection, sprite artists can potentially produce works that stand the test of time better than their contemporaries in the high-end polygon space. And in my opinion, Eastward is the new king of the 2D pixel art ring. One look at Shanghai studio Pixpil's debut title is enough to make even the most jaded retro gaming contrarians shed tears of desire.

You are drawn into a world devastated by a miasma of unknown origin, in which survivors and their descendants have repurposed the structures and technologies of the previous age into a slapdash facsimile of 1980s society. The rich, colorful setpieces offer clues that fill in the gaps left by Eastward's intentionally vague backstory, while expressive environmental animations – steam billowing above rooftops, the subtle shimmer atop water puddles – inject vibrancy into an ecosystem otherwise mired in decay.

We follow the trials of John, a silent yet reliable man of action with a penchant for cooking, and Sam, an energy-channeling girl who John found in a lab and decided to raise as his own daughter. After being banished from their underground settlement, the duo take to the railway in search of a new home. No sooner do they acclimate themselves to their new surroundings and endear themselves to their new neighbors than tragedy strikes. Thus, their eastbound pilgrimage continues.

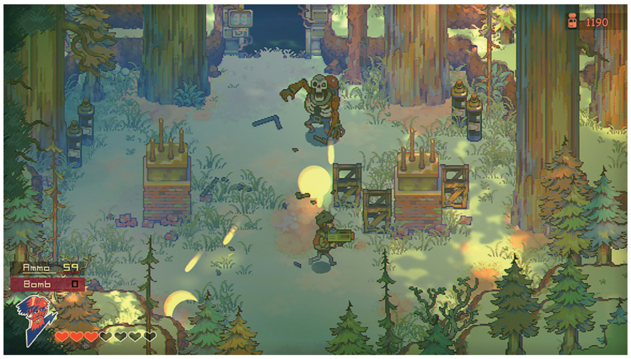
The most surprising part about the narrative is how the main quest – halting the spread of the miasma and solving the mystery of Sam's origin – takes a backseat in favor of deep exploration into the goings-on of the populace. Events unfold like episodes of a slice-of-life anime: On her first day of school, Sam comes to the aid of a classmate getting bullied. Later on, she sneaks into a casino and uses a lucky coin to completely clean house, rousing the ire of the cigar-smoking owner. As for John, his stoicism and reliability attract the romantic interest of a small village's handywoman. Meanwhile, his combat prowess attracts the attention of a film director, who decides to make him into an action movie star!

Every NPC is bursting with personality, always with fresh dialogue to drive home that their lives don't stop when John and Sam step out of the room. Of course, it's Sam, ever a bubbling beacon of inquisitiveness and positivity, who steals the spotlight at every turn. And though she may wear a long-sleeved shirt several sizes too large – an obvious hand-me-down from a man who can't afford much – her love for her adoptive father shines through. (It's unfortunate that John himself is so emotionless. In a game all about the importance of interpersonal relationships, a silent protagonist is simply out of place.)

There are many interactive elements that serve no function other than to add flavor to the world, like toilet lids that can be opened and closed, or a statue ghost who divulges urban legends. The most elaborate distraction is Sam's favorite video game, Earth Born – a full-fat 8-bit RPG that can be played at kiosks throughout the land! And can you believe it has toys-to-life support!? Little monster figurines called Pixballs obtained from capsule machines grant your party extra items or access to secret bosses!

Eastward may be a triumph when it comes to character interactions and world building, but this commitment to narrative development ironically weakens the actual game. Outside of towns, it's an action-adventure with a player-swapping mechanic – John wields a frying pan

SWITCH PUBLISHER: CHUCKLEFISH
DEVELOPER: PIXPIL RATING: T



8.0

along with an assortment of guns and bombs, while Sam uses energy manipulation to stun foes, recharge health or erect psychic barriers. There are sections when the pair must split apart or solve puzzles, as well as hidden treasure chests stuffed with health-extending orbs and upgrade parts. Combat can get a little rough when switching in the heat of battle, and the decision to restrict movement to the analog stick is maddening (especially when the D-Pad can be used to scroll menus and even navigate in Earth Born). But overall, the experience is serviceable, with some sparks of ingenuity.

However, these sections are bookended by lengthy town drama, resulting in an uneven pace at which more action-oriented players would take umbrage. Exploration also suffers as you're often locked out of areas after playing through them once. Furthermore, combat growth is tied not to experience points but to an upgrade system reliant on limited materials, so prepare for hours-long stretches during which enemies become more aggressive while you're still slumming with a Level 1 pea shooter.

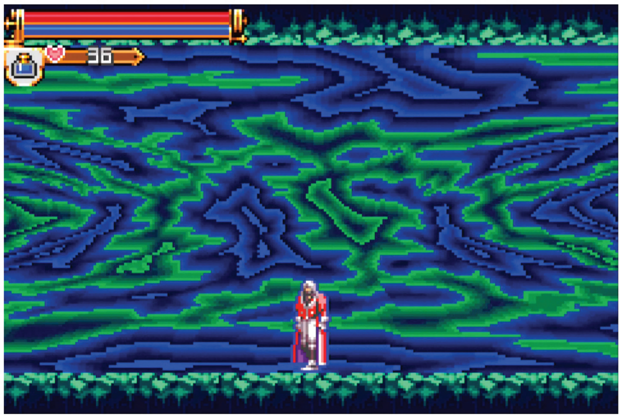
It's no surprise then that Eastward commits that most grievous of action-adventure sins: permanently missable items. Pixballs and cooking ingredients become unavailable beyond a certain window, as do a couple of Sam's high-level techniques. But nothing is more frustrating than being unable to upgrade your weapons because there was a treasure chest tucked away in a bush two towns back with a necessary gear piece! And there's no map function that notifies you of remaining items in an area, nor any secret shop late in the adventure where you can purchase missed trinkets for a markup.

Perhaps all that's by design. As the metaphor-dispensing save point refrigerators – yes, you read that correctly – are wont to expound, memories are like food we wish to preserve in cold storage. Try as we might to revisit the past, those moments spoil ere long and must be discarded. Sure, that's a great sentiment . . . as long as you give players a heads-up when they're about to hit a point of no return, especially in a nearly 30-hour adventure without a New Game+!

I finished Eastward burdened with regret and melancholy, but I can't deny the joy it inspired, nor the many, many colorful friends who made this darkly hopeful tale all the more memorable. Maybe this is a sign that I ought to appreciate what I found rather than lament what I missed. Not a bad takeaway, wouldn't you say? **– TONY**

OPTIONAL TANGIBILITY

As has become the case with more and more eShop titles, Eastward has launched as a digital exclusive, but physical versions are planned to debut later. A Japanese cart edition lands on November 25, including English text. Then iam8bit is crafting a separate boxed edition for 2022, too!



Revisit One of Castlevania's Best Eras

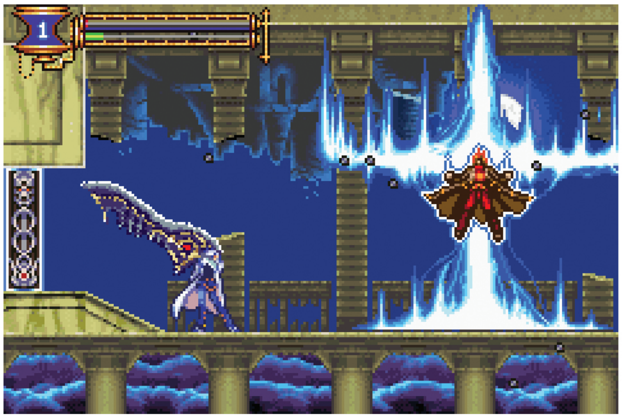
CASTLEVANIA ADVANCE COLLECTION

KONAMI STRUCK GOLD with Castlevania: Symphony of the Night in 1997. That pioneering PlayStation sensation wiped away the Vania series' previous standard structure of presenting adventures as stage-by-stage, linear enemy gauntlets and replaced it with the exploration-focused, go-anywhere structure of Nintendo's Metroid series. Konami – and game designer Koji Igarashi in particular – did such a great job capturing the fun of investigating Dracula's castle at your own pace that an all-new genre designation began to take shape. Ever since Symphony, these kinds of "search action" games have largely been referred to as "Metroidvanias." It was a phenomenal success!

Then they had to do it again.

Symphony of the Night was such a huge hit that it changed the whole direction of the Castlevania series forever, as that '97 quest became the template that future adventures would be based upon. Konami's first attempts at recapturing that same lightning in a bottle then arrived on Nintendo's Game Boy Advance.

Castlevania Advance Collection gathers together a trio of GBA titles Konami modeled after Symphony: 2001's Circle of the Moon, 2002's Harmony of Dissonance and 2003's Aria of Sorrow. Each of them is an excellent individual effort and would be well worth revisiting alone. All together, for the equivalent of a few bucks apiece, the value is incredible!



Circle of the Moon, as the earliest effort, understandably shows its age the most. It was a Day 1 launch title for the GBA (and actually the game I first bought alongside my own GBA in June 2001!), and it has a stiffness to it that lets you know it was the dev team's first attempt at making a Symphony-alike work on hardware with less power. Still, it's a charming game that really went above and beyond the call of duty in depth, presenting a huge castle, a unique magic system and a wild whip spin move that you can just use forever while standing still. It's hilarious.

The first GBAs had notoriously dim screens, and Circle of the Moon got called out for being difficult to see due to its dark visuals, so the devs overcompensated with their next effort – the psychedelically bright Harmony of Dissonance. It would've been nice to have a "tone down the vibrance" option added now that we're in the opposite age of handheld OLED screens, but it's still a fun second course at this budget-priced banquet.

The heavy hitter here: Aria of Sorrow. Starring fan-favorite protagonist Soma Cruz, full of gameplay variety and topped off with a deep monster soul-capturing system, this is a game that regularly ranks in hardcore Vania fans' all-time Top 5.

Replaying Aria immediately after running back through Circle and Harmony makes me appreciate it even more, as Iga and his team truly managed to find that Symphony magic again. Aria is the game that proved "search action" still had something new to say in this series, and it wasn't all going to be about riding the 1997 hit's coattails forever after. If you play just one, play it.

Tossed in as an extra alongside these three go-anywhere games? An old stage-by-stage linear enemy gauntlet! Castlevania: Dracula X, from the SNES, is also here. It's not a fondly remembered game, but it's nice to have as a "freebie" and it does star the now Smash-famous Richter Belmont, so it's nice to see it again. Especially since the Rewind option included in this Collection makes it much more approachable than it first was back in 1995!

Control remapping, flexible save options, the ability to choose the original Japanese versions, an art gallery and more all round out this wonderful compilation. With all that and the games being just $5 each, I can't recommend this enough!
– LUCAS

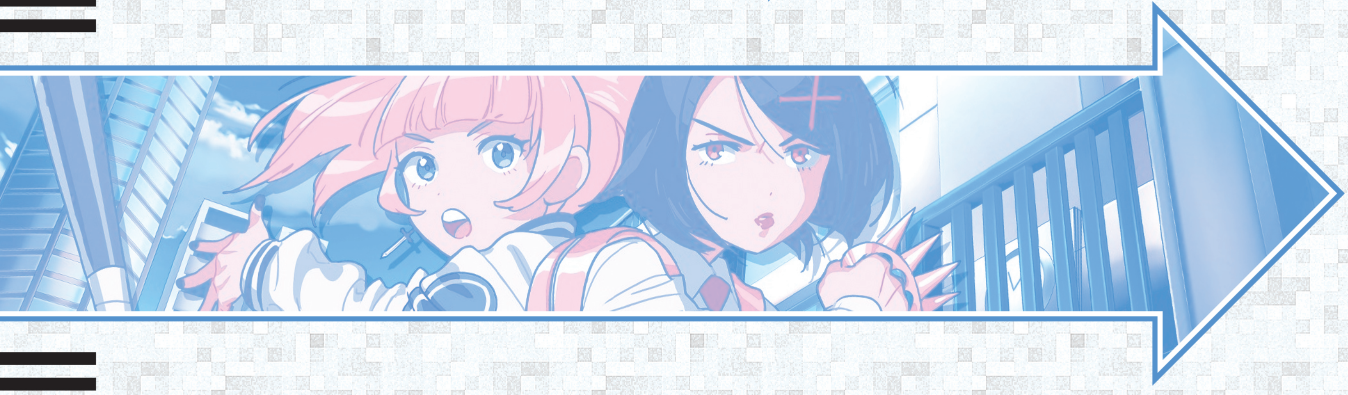
SWITCH PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: M2 RATING: T

9.5

BY JOHN-CHARLES HOLMES

FINDING A WayForward

For over 30 years, they've built up a reputation for being the developers who can be entrusted with any brand. Even Nintendo is handing over classic IPs now! As Advance Wars approaches, let's look back on many of the ways that WayForward has found a way to move franchises forward before.



CONTRA

BEFORE WAYFORWARD, Contra was a series with an identity crisis. After five stellar games spread across the NES, Game Boy, Super NES, Genesis and arcades, it was lost in the era of 3D. Whether or not Konami had a clue is anyone's guess, as they handed the reins of 32-bit development over to Appaloosa Interactive, who went on to try to bring the series into 3D with Contra: Legacy of War, and then dialed things back by adding more "classic Contra" to C: The Contra Adventure. If you're wondering how they fared, despite following the further adventures of Ray Poward from Contra: Hard Corps, both titles would be stricken from continuity.

Things fared only so much better come the sixth generation of consoles, as things were brought back in-house with Contra: Shattered Soldier. This entry tried returning to the series' roots with 2.5-D action, albeit with a more grotesque, gritty art direction. Then came Neo Contra, which again attempted to evolve the formula with more stages played from an isometric view and shifting camera perspectives.

While Shattered Soldier generally received favorable reviews, things dipped with Neo Contra, so Konami once more looked for a new team to handle development duties. Enter: WayForward. They would turn back the clock in more ways than one, setting their game directly after the last numbered Contra game, Contra III: The Alien Wars. Not only that, but the gameplay, audio and visual styles were turned back to reflect the series' conventions at that point in time, while still making the most of what the Nintendo DS' improved tech had to offer. Their game truly earned its title: "Contra 4."

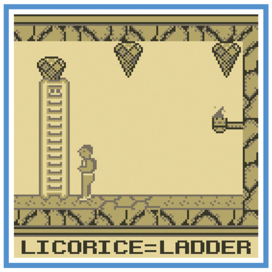
Higher-resolution graphics spread the gameplay across both screens as players traversed them with a new grappling hook feature. The game came packed with content, too – at least as Contra games tend to go. In addition to the main "Arcade" mode, players could unlock a Challenge mode, which could then be used to unlock additional characters, comics, a museum and even the NES versions of Contra and Super C!

While they would not get to continue with the series, WayForward's effort paved the way forward for the series for years to come. In addition to Contra 4 being ported to mobile devices, M2's Contra ReBirth would follow a similar retro style on WiiWare, and Arc System Works' Hard Corps: Uprising would evolve Contra: Hard Corps' conventions with 2D gameplay utilizing a more anime-based style. The retro style would also be favored by mobile titles before Konami tried once more (unsuccessfully) to evolve the series into 3D with Contra: Rogue Corps. **– DAVID**

A BOY AND HIS BLOB

THE ORIGINAL NES release of A Boy and His Blob was certainly creative, but to call it "The World's Biggest Exercise in Frustration" would be an understatement. If you knew where to go and what to do, you could beat the game in half an hour. If you didn't know what to do – and trust me, you didn't – your quest would last roughly the rest of your life.

You control a boy whose only power is "owns some jellybeans," while your extraterrestrial blobby buddy can turn into any object upon eating said jellybeans. It sounds like the team-up of the century, but honestly you'll spend most of your time aimlessly wandering through a maze of screens with no context for what your next move should be. You might guess that turning the blob into a bridge will help you cross a pit, but what about the dead end beyond it? What do you even use? Umbrellas? Ladders? HUMMINGBIRDS? The game's Game Boy sequel assisted players . . . by taking all the color away and squeezing the screen dimensions. Turns out the solution was "turn both games off and wait 20 years for a remake."



By contrast, WayForward's take on A Boy and His Blob is an absolute joy. No longer a confusing labyrinth devoid of logic, this new adventure is a clever puzzle platformer made up of levels with obvious goals. You're now armed with infinite jellybeans and are limited to only the relevant transformations for each level, so now you can focus on coming up with solutions instead of chucking candy in all directions and praying for mercy.

Sometimes tossing a bean down to a low ledge or across a chasm and allowing the blob to transform at a distance is the way to go, and it's up to you to decide when and where to let the little fellow use his powers. The answers aren't always spelled out for you, but you'll get that "ah-ha!" moment sooner rather than later. Other times you just need to use the blob to avoid hazards, but in all cases you feel a sense of accomplishment when your plan succeeds.

The art direction is perfect. From the vibrant forests beyond the boy's treehouse to the blob's home planet, the painted landscapes and bright colors let you know that both your world and his are warm, inviting places worth saving. It's a world you want to explore and want to see more of, so when the evil forces arrive, you're ready to drive them away . . . despite how cute the enemy blobs are.

Oh, and also there's a "hug the blob" button and it's the most adorable thing you'll ever see in your entire life. Just sayin'.

This game has just been ported to Switch, so give it a look! **– LINDSEY**

Marvel Comics

FOR A LONG TIME, Marvel games could be split into two distinct groups: the Capcom 2D fighting games and the mostly 3D adaptations of various movies and comic storylines. The games in Group 1 were hugely successful and highly admired. Group 2 was more of a mixed bag. Most suffered from the licensed game triple curse: high expectations from fans, low budgets and middling commitment from their work-for-hire developers. And they were always about the same characters: the X-Men, Spider-Man or whoever had a movie or TV tie-in at the time (Silver Surfer, Blade, the Hulk, etc.).

It's hard to imagine now, over a decade into the MCU era of pop culture, but in the early 2000s the Avengers were not a big deal at all. Outside of a 1991 arcade game starring Captain America, Iron Man, Vision and Hawkeye, it was rare to see anyone from that supergroup appear outside of a Capcom fighter. And Thor? Not a chance. He had no shows, no movies and no chill. His biggest pop culture appearance was a cameo in Elisabeth Shue's 1987 comedy film, Adventures in Babysitting! But that was about to change.

WayForward doesn't always have loads of cash on hand to make their games, but one thing is for sure: They're never short on passion. The odds were against them with their X-Men and Thor games. They were strapped to older hardware, Marvel fans were breathing down their necks with high expectations and they had very little time to put it all together. It was a no-win situation for the developers – so instead of marching ahead to failure, they brought in a new drummer and changed the beat.

For 2006's X-Men: The Official Game, they enlisted the help of Chris Bachalo, one of the best comic artists in the business, to provide original character art. *(Note: Bachalo would later work with WayForward on Aliens: Infestation, one of the best game adaptations of that horror franchise.)* Right away, you could see the game was more aligned with the graphic novels than films, helping to set players' standards appropriately. They also thought outside the box by introducing X-23 to the story, a character who wouldn't make her debut in the movies until Logan hit theaters in 2017.

Thor: God of Thunder on the DS made similar moves. If you play the game on your birthday (as set in the DS' internal memory), you can unlock Frog Thor as a playable character. The amphibian variant of the hunky, hammer-wielding hero recently made a cameo in the Loki show on Disney+, and is rumored to make his big-screen debut in Thor: Love and Thunder next year. It's just one of many examples of WayForward's imagination being ahead of the curve! **– JONATHAN**

DC Comics

A LOT OF Batman's costumes used to be bright blue, but you'd never know that from watching the past 30 years of his movies. A long time ago, DC Comics was known for walking on the brighter, safer side of the superhero street. Then writers like Frank Miller and Alan Moore came in, inspiring directors like Tim Burton, Christopher Nolan and Zack Snyder to make gruff and grumbly (but still fun!) DC films, and the rest is history.

In the world of games, this turn to the dark and the gritty came to a head in the late 2000s with Batman: Arkham Asylum. After a decade of digital adventures in various styles, it quickly became the Dark Knight's biggest electronic hit. Moist glistening skin, realistic frowns, rippling muscles and multiple swear words rounded out the game's more "grown-up feel," which also barred Batman's more colorful and more comical superfriends, like The Flash, from ever joining in the fun. This was what DC thought people wanted from their games back when WayForward first started developing titles for them.

WayForward's first team-up with DC actually came out a little before Arkham Asylum. Justice League Heroes: The Flash was a 2006 GBA side story connected to a larger range of Justice League games, and was the only one to put The Scarlet Speedster in the leading role. It would mark the first (and maybe last) time that The Flash would star in a video game since an ill-fated pair of TV show tie-in titles in the early '90s. The game took great joy in crossing over with other colorful, superpowered heroes, and gave players the chance to use Wally West's super speed for all sorts of fast-paced shenanigans. The game reviewed well, positioning WayForward to pitch an even braver, bolder take on the DC universe.

Literally titled Batman: The Brave and the Bold, this pair of Wii and DS titles would stand in stark contrast to the shadowy, serious Arkham Asylum on HD consoles. Using character designs, music and, on the Wii, even voice actors (like comedians Diedrich Bader and Paul "Pee-wee Herman" Reubens) from the TV show of the same name, it would be the wildest Batman game yet. The Flash was there too, ready to help, alongside Green Lantern, Red Tornado, Blue Beetle and loads of other colorful DC heroes.

The market may have demanded something more brooding, but WayForward insisted that their DC games be packed with silly moments, handshakes and humanitarianism. Though there are a few times when Batman himself turns into non-human forms, like a cat or a gorilla. Maybe a certain belly dancing half-genie rubbed off on Mr. Wayne? **– JONATHAN**

BloodRayne

BACK IN THE early '00s, the style of game that we'd now refer to as hack-and-slash or character action was just beginning to define itself. Brawlers had made sense in the 2D era: You walk left or right, encounter bad guys, beat them up and then keep moving forward. But as the industry went 3D, simply punching foes in the face wasn't flashy enough any more. Gamers demanded over-the-top attacks and animations, with protagonists that carved through endless enemies who appeared from all angles!

In this era, the perfect hero to do just that emerged: BloodRayne, a half-vampire secret agent wielding two huge blades. With an extra injection of sex appeal (also perfectly representative of that same era), Rayne danced and slashed her way through bloodsoaked battles, chopping off limbs with ease and sinking her vampire teeth into her foes to finish them off (and recharge her health too). BloodRayne's games were often clunky, but she got two of them, and those inspired a series of live-action movies . . . which may be the worst game-to-film adaptations ever made. (They really bite!)

Story time! Back in 2011, I was in the middle of my tenure with IGN and got to attend that year's E3 under that brand name. And let me tell you, an IGN nametag at E3 opens every door imaginable – I got to see all kinds of games "behind closed doors" and meet with more developers than I had in all my previous E3s combined! The memory that has stuck with me the most from that event, though, is when I went to visit WayForward's team and they showed me BloodRayne: Betrayal. They were just so genuinely eager to share what they'd been working on! Though they knew the game intimately since they themselves had made it, their earnest enthusiasm and hype for it made it seem like they were seeing it for the first time too. That energy – that infectiously positive vibe – must be a big part of why the WayForward team keeps getting entrusted to care for so many big brands!

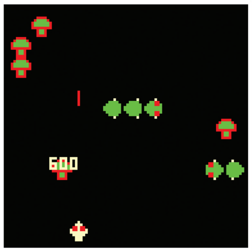
The game design itself perfectly illustrates WayForward's power to examine a brand and draw out its untapped potential. Though the previous BloodRayne games had been 3D slash-'em-ups, Betrayal went back in time by presenting a 2D sidescrolling slasher instead. (The story went back in time too – it was a prequel!) Rayne and the world around her were stylishly redrawn with a comic/cartoon look, but the younger-skewing art didn't keep her from dispatching her foes with just as much over-the-top violence as before.

All three BloodRayne games have recently been remastered and ported to Switch, so seek them out. Especially WayForward's Betrayal! **– LUCAS**

Centipede

IT ISN'T OFTEN we have reason to bring up Atari's 1981 arcade classic Centipede these days, but it just so happens that we're looking back on it twice in this same issue! If you're flipping straight through these pages, you already saw our review of the brand-new Centipede: Recharged back in the Download section. It's the latest attempt to recapture the magic of the original, arriving 10 years after WayForward took their turn.

Before WayForward's intervention with Infestation, Centipede was a series with about as much direction as a scuttling bug. It was a shooter sensation as a coin-op cabinet in 1981, raking in whatever quarters hadn't already been dropped into the Donkey Kong and Pac-Man machines placed nearby. It got an immediate sequel, Millipede, the following year, which amped up the action with greater enemy variety and became nearly equally adored. But after that? Next to no further evolution for the nascent series for decades on end – fans simply had to entertain themselves with the smattering of ports to other platforms the first two games got.



This year marked Centipede's 40th anniversary, so perhaps that's why we just got Recharged. Similarly, 2011 hosting the game's 30th birthday could have been a motivating factor behind Atari reaching out to WayForward to develop and release a new sequel that year!

Centipede: Infestation was a Nintendo-exclusive double-header, with one version made for the Wii and a portable alternative take developed for the brand-new 3DS. Both versions were built as twin-stick shooters . . . in a sense. The 3DS only had one "stick," so its buttons had to serve as the second. The Wii game could be played with a dual-stick control scheme if you had access to a Classic Controller – otherwise the IR pointer on the Wii Remote would direct the aim of your attacks while the analog stick on the Nunchuk handled movement.

It was a natural evolution for the frantic shooting gameplay of the old arcade classic: Instead of bugs swarming into play from straight ahead and only being able to shoot up to exterminate them, new hero Max had to watch out for incoming insects at all angles and then spin his weaponry in a full circular arc to intercept them. The game managed to nail the most important aspect of what made Centipede feel fun: its sense of tension. The feeling that you're really about to be overrun at any second, and the exhilaration when you manage to battle back from the brink of defeat!

It's interesting to look back on a series WayForward reinvented that has since been reinvented again. Happy anniversary, I guess! **– LUCAS**

Double Dragon

DOUBLE DRAGON HAS long been one of those classic 8-bit series that often begs the question "Where are they now?" After becoming a mainstay of both arcades and the NES, then getting a lovingly atrocious animated series and a live-action film, Double Dragon stumbled into the 16-bit era and never quite made the jump to 3D and beyond.

It's a real shame, too – Double Dragon played host to a number of iconic NES heroes (Billy & Jimmy Lee and their long-lost brother chained up in the attic, Bimmy), villains (beefy Bo Abobo and the genre icon dominatrix armed with a whip) and, most memorably, one of the catchiest soundtracks on the console!

No other beat-'em-up exemplified the crime-ridden revenge fantasies of a post-Reaganomics America more, and perhaps that's to blame for its dormancy in the decades since. After one more outing alongside the Battletoads, Double Dragon mostly just made occasional appearances in retro collections and got a few ports to digital storefronts.

Once WayForward's Double Dragon: Neon blasted onto the scene, it acted not just as a self-aware love letter to the original, but to everything '80s! Billy and Jimmy were reworked into teenage lunkheads in the tradition of Zack Morris and A.C. Slater, equipped with dedicated high-five and beatboxing commands to power up in the middle of a fight.

It'd be pretty safe to say Big Trouble in Little China served as the biggest inspiration for the comedy-adventure tone of this full 3D brawler, but by its end, Neon pulls from influences including Little Shop of Horrors, Enter the Dragon and even He-Man – the new big bad is Skullmageddon (who you may have spotted in River City Girls), a skeletonized dark wizard who more or less sounds exactly like Skeletor (ask your parents, kids).

While there's much to be said for the game's souped-up graphics, expanded gameplay and literally neon-soaked visuals, the real star was one of Jake Kaufman's most impressive soundtracks to date. Jake paid homage to '80s pop and rock with some catchy parodies, but Neon also represents one of the first times he'd set in-game music to actual lyrics, setting the stage for WayForward's River City Girls years later.

Special moves are unlocked by collecting 20 different cassette tapes (again, ask your parents), each containing a short song, *with lyrics*, all written by Jake. It was this sort of dedication to going above and beyond with a nearly inert license that made Double Dragon: Neon an instant cult hit when it first released in 2012. **– JOHN-CHARLES**

Silent Hill

FOR BEING ONE of the most influential survival horror franchises, Silent Hill hasn't been treated with the greatest respect by its parent company. The PS1 original and its three PS2 sequels were all developed by Team Silent, a rotating assembly of internal Konami staffers. While the fourth title received a mixed reception, the others remain beloved by those who prefer terrors of the more psychological persuasion, rather than your typical monsters and ghouls.

Unfortunately, Konami decided to disband the team in favor of outsourcing subsequent chapters to Western studios. These titles were lambasted for their predictability, poor characters and inability to recapture the classic series atmosphere. The one that got closest was perhaps Climax Studios' Shattered Memories, a Wii reimagining of the PS1 original, though that too was burdened by certain unorthodox decisions, like the total removal of combat. Still, if any Western development house could have done justice to the Silent Hill name, it would have been WayForward . . .

We may be celebrating WayForward's ability to breathe new life into struggling brands, but it's just as important to acknowledge that not every effort is a slam dunk. Some shots are bricks – and Silent Hill: Book of Memories was one heavy brick!

Released exclusively for PlayStation Vita in October 2012, Book of Memories is a dungeon-crawling action RPG viewed from an overhead perspective. You customize an avatar selected from one of five classes, then battle through procedurally generated levels either solo or cooperatively with three friends, all while building stats, acquiring (then subsequently breaking) weapons and collecting puzzle pieces. So, ya know, a little different than what you'd come to expect from Silent Hill.

The threadbare story involves the titular book, which contains every event in your character's life up until that point. By rewriting the book in order to improve your life, you impact the lives of others – the dungeons you navigate are manifestations of those changes. But aside from monster cameos pulled from throughout the series, none of the trademark Silent Hill psychological horror is present. In fact, the game isn't scary at all!

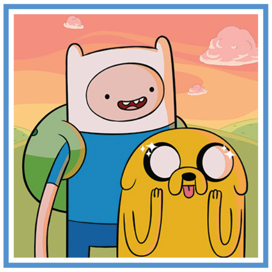
To be fair, it wasn't WayForward's idea to take Silent Hill in such a drastic new direction. Blame Konami's demands for something nontraditional that could be played portably and in short bursts with friends. They merely did their best to satisfy those criteria, and the result was the worst-rated Silent Hill ever . . . so thanks a bunch, Konami. **– TONY**

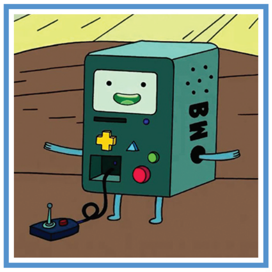
ADVENTURE TIME

THERE WERE ABOUT two and a half years between the initial air date of Adventure Time on Cartoon Network and the release of its very first video game, and that clock started ticking immediately. BMO, one of the main characters of the show, is literally a video game console! Finn and Jake play games on him all the time, including an action platformer called Guardians of Sunshine. Most fans expected the first Adventure Time game to take a similar bent, but in terms of scope, hopes went through the roof.

Would the game be a massive lo-fi epic like Minecraft, or a sprawling open-world action RPG, like a cuter Skyrim? Or would it be a simpler design, made for kids and their parents to enjoy together? The series felt tailor-made for adults who grew up with 1980s cartoons and games like Thundercats and Castlevania, eager to pass down their delightful brand weirdness to a new generation.

Could the developers at WayForward be the ones to somehow make all these candy-coated video game dreams come true?



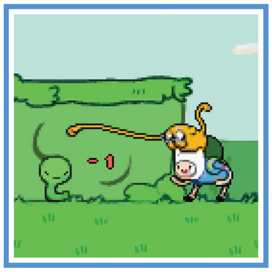


Working closely with Pendleton Ward, creator of the series, Adventure Time: Hey Ice King! Why'd You Steal Our Garbage?!! (or AT:HIK!WYSOG?!! for short) is a canonical story in the franchise. It starts with the Ice King (you guessed it) stealing our heroes' rubbish. No big deal, right? But it turns out he's using the trash to create a new bride, the appropriately named "Garbage Princess." This is a problem, and there's only one way to solve it: a mix of exploration and cartoon violence!

Working with top animators like Paul Robertson and Joakim Sandberg, director James Montagna worked to make everything about the game look and feel true to the source material. There's original music by Jake Kaufman, and boss fights against Donny (the obnoxygen-producing grass ogre), Marceline (the Vampire Queen) and, of course, the Ice King himself!

Structurally, the design borrows liberally from Zelda II: The Adventure of Link, but with two playable characters at your "disposal." In the overworld, Jake can stretch and grow in order to work around obstacles in the environment. In sidescrolling action/platforming scenes, Finn takes the lead, stomping and slashing foes while hunting for new abilities.

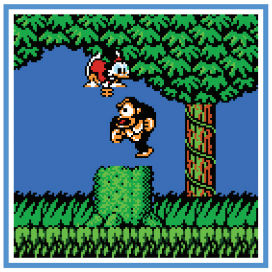
With a rousing ending song from vocalist Cristina Vee and a series of final battles that truly bring it all together, most fans only had one complaint about AT:HIK!WYSOG?!!: They wanted more! Luckily, WayForward's services were retained, and the studio ended up revisiting the Land of Ooo three more times in the following years. **— JONATHAN**

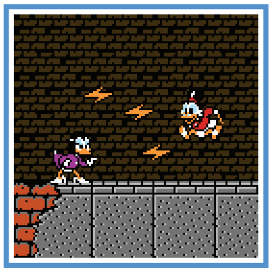


DUCKTALES

DUCKTALES HAS REMAINED one of the best platformers on the Nintendo Entertainment System ever since it was first released in 1989, when it kicked off Capcom's stellar series of video game adaptations of the Disney Afternoon cartoon block. As Scrooge McDuck, you searched the four corners of the globe — and the moon! — for five legendary treasures, encountering both enemies and allies drawn straight out of the show, like the Beagle Boys, Magica De Spell, Mrs. Beakley and Launchpad McQuack.

Scrooge's special move was the pogo jump, where he bounced on the end of his trademark cane (the controls took me a long time to master as a young child), and he could also swing his cane like a golf club to shoot rocks at treasure chests and enemies! The graphics were designed by Mega Man artist Keiji Inafune, and the music was composed by Hiroshige Tonomura. In fact, Tonomura's Moon Theme became so enduringly iconic that it ended up being used as a lullaby sung by Della Duck (Donald's sister and Huey, Dewey and Louie's mom) in the rebooted DuckTales cartoon nearly 30 years later!





In 2013, WayForward announced their partnership with both Capcom *and* Disney to bring DuckTales: Remastered to a whole new generation of fans. Along with beautiful hand-drawn art for both characters and backgrounds — looking like they came straight out of an original DuckTales episode — a revamped control scheme (including an option for a one-button pogo jump) and music remixed and reimagined from Tonomura's originals by Jake Kaufman, it was released to all then-current consoles, including Wii U.

The best part was that WayForward was able to reunite most of the original voice cast — including Alan Young as Scrooge and June Foray as Magica De Spell, who were both *in their nineties* when they reprised their roles! The original story was fleshed out to include an overarching plot: After the Beagle Boys break into Scrooge's Money Bin during the new tutorial level, Scrooge and the nephews find a treasure map on the back of an old painting. After all five of the treasures are collected, the nephews are kidnapped by Magica, and Scrooge must brave Magica's lair, the molten Mt. Vesuvius (another new level replacing the Transylvania reprise of the original) in order to win them back. As it turns out, the five treasures were the ingredients needed for Magica to resurrect the final boss, Dracula Duck!

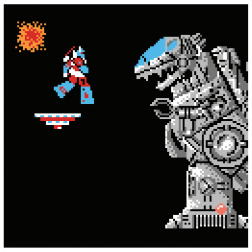
But the most fun part? All the money and treasure you collect goes into Scrooge's Money Bin, where you can "dive around in it like a porpoise and burrow through it like a gopher" just like in the cartoon and in Carl Barks' original Uncle Scrooge comics! **— REBECCA**

TRANSFORMERS

THE TRANSFORMERS . . . by its very name alone, the series is evocative of change. As a result, it should come as no surprise that, quite frankly, there has been no one set style of game associated with the franchise.

Exclusively in Japan, the Famicom and Famicom Disk System saw a pair of Generation 1 platformers so infamous as to be considered among the worst games of all time, while the temporarily Blockbuster-exclusive N64 title Transformers: Beast Wars Transmetals was a 3D fighting game.

Over time, third-person shooters seem to have become the go-to for many Transformers titles, including several based on the Michael Bay films and a fan-favorite pair of preludes to the Aligned continuity, War for Cybertron and Fall of Cybertron. While the Wii would get a poorly received rail shooter companion to the former, Nintendo stalwarts would see no such game for the latter. Regrettably, the Fall of Cybertron would soon precede the fall of its developer, High Moon Studios, as a developer of Transformers and other licensed titles.



With High Moon Studios out of the picture, development of the next console Transformers game shifted to Edge of Reality, who basically adopted the gameplay style of their predecessor's titles for a new entry. Not only would this new game, Rise of the Dark Spark, tie into the Cybertron series, but *also* the Michael Bay films as well!

Unfortunately, it fit in with neither very well, with several events contradicting both the latest film it was meant to tie into, Age of Extinction, and its placement between the two Cybertron titles, particularly Fall of Cybertron. Of course, if one were to ignore the movie and disregard the aforementioned games (which should be little problem for Nintendo-only players, considering), then it may stand well enough on its own.

WayForward's part in all of this? To produce the 3DS version.

While the plot is more or less the same as the console version, WayForward decided to instead create a turn-based tactical RPG, à la Fire Emblem. On the map screen, characters and surroundings are represented by pixel art, but when engaging in battle, things switch over to a 3D-rendered clash between Autobots and Decepticons, wherein you're given a set number of rounds to finish off your foe.

While the ending teased a possible continuation of the story of the Dark Spark set in the G1 continuity, it never came to pass. Meanwhile, the idea of Transformers strategy RPGs clearly appealed to someone, as this would be the form taken by the recent Transformers: Battlegrounds. **— DAVID**

THE MUMMY

MARVEL'S CINEMATIC UNIVERSE wasn't the first time a studio linked individual films within a shared ecosystem. One of its most famous progenitors is the Universal Monsters series, a string of movies from the 1930s through 1950s that starred Dracula, Frankenstein's Monster, the Wolf Man and others. Thus, with Marvel's success as impetus, Universal Pictures decided it was time to update Universal Monsters for the 21st century.

Kicking off the rechristened Dark Universe was 2017's The Mummy, the second remake of the 1932 horror classic. Links to the original as well as to the 1999 Brendan Fraser revival were tenuous at best, however – this Tom Cruise-led vehicle was a disjointed mess that completely rewrote the mythos and crammed in narrative hooks intended to be expanded upon in future films. Critics and audiences alike were so turned off, in fact, that Universal was prepared to scrap the nascent Dark Universe entirely. (It's only thanks to 2020's more well-received The Invisible Man that the studio has seemingly recently gained renewed confidence in the project.)

While WayForward's continued existence as a contract house may be necessary to fund their passion projects, that status means they get saddled with unappealing licenses from time to time. But they still make magic happen!

According to The Mummy Demastered director Austin Ivansmith, pre-production began a mere half-year prior to the film's scheduled release in June 2017. The speedy turnaround reflected the game's straightforward direction as a 2D Metroidvania that explored environments from the movie, yet told an original companion story. It's a strategy straight from the NES/SNES-era movie-to-game conversion playbook – when a faithful adaptation isn't feasible, just make what you think will be the most fun.

And fun it was! Demastered blends non-linear exploration with Contra-esque run-and-gun action, pitting players against the revived Princess Ahmanet and her army of monsters inspired by Castlevania's bestiary more than anything from the film. Even Tom Cruise's Nick Morton is absent! Instead, you control a nameless agent from the counter-supernatural organization Prodigium, and should he fall, you'll direct a replacement to eliminate the zombified corpse of your predecessor and collect his equipment.

The game wound up missing its original June release and arrived that October instead. Probably for the best, as the distance from the film's disastrous launch gave audiences a chance to approach it with more open minds. Demastered is easily the best piece of media under the Mummy umbrella from the past three decades. (Sorry, Brendan Fraser!) **— TONY**

Bloodstained

INSPIRED BY THE success of former Capcom producer Keiji Inafune's Mighty No. 9 on Kickstarter (though probably less so the final product), former Castlevania producer Koji Igarashi parted ways with Konami and set out to find his own way through the still-burgeoning, wild world of indepe-dent video game crowdfunding campaigns.

Igarashi made a name for himself with his role in developing Castlevania: Symphony of the Night and his continued stewardship of the series, producing (among other things) many similarly styled search action games for the Game Boy Advance and Nintendo DS. When Konami decided to go in a new direction for the series with future Metroid developer MercurySteam's Castlevania: Lords of Shadow, Igarashi was forced to step away from the series he had been a part of for so long.

However, not everyone was a fan of the new reboot. Fans continued to ask Igarashi to continue his work with the series, so he set out to create a spiritual successor to the franchise, and turned to Kickstarter to fund it!

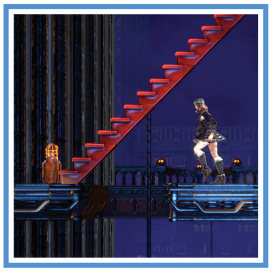
Bloodstained would turn out to be a kitchen with many cooks. Among those developing the game early on were ArtPlay, the mobile developer that Igarashi had signed on with after leaving Konami, and Inti Creates, known well for their work with Capcom in creating various Mega Man titles.

WayForward's involvement would come a bit later in development, as they were brought in to use their expertise in the art of 2D platform gaming to help polish the game further, not only fixing bugs, but also making other contributions. This excited Igarashi, as he was not only familiar with their platforming pedigree, but was also encouraged by the knowledge that one of their employees had worked with him on a previous project.

Of particular note, those "other contributions" include one of the Kickstarter campaign's stretch goals: the inclusion of a "Classic Mode," which features five levels of old-school platforming and boss battles styled after the pre-Symphony era of Castlevania whippin' terrors. And if you want to take it even further, this mode's own "1986 Mode" restricts Miriam's movements even more, truly hearkening back to the NES originals!

Another stretch goal brought to life by WayForward? "Boss Revenge Mode," wherein you get to take control of four of the game's unique bosses and put them to work taking down the heroes who once thought they'd seen the last of you!

Bloodstained seems poised to continue as its own franchise, so maybe WayForward will be there to continue their aid with a sequel? **— DAVID**



River City Ransom

UNTANGLING THE TWISTED web that is the River City/Kunio-kun series is about as futile as assembling a jigsaw puzzle picture side down and with pieces missing. Most early entries never made the trip across the Pacific, while the ones that did were retitled in such a way that made them difficult to connect as parts of the same brand – Renegade, Super Dodge Ball and Crash 'n the Boys: Street Challenge, to name a few.

Despite all the localization woes, River City Ransom remains an NES classic. Its combination of belt-scrolling combat and light RPG progression struck a chord with players who went on to develop some of today's best brawlers. One such directly inspired title was 2017's River City Ransom: Underground, a sequel that follows our more familiar Westernized adapta-tion. And though it was an indie Kickstarter project, Underground received the blessings of both Kunio-kun creator Yoshihisa Kishimoto and series rights holder Arc System Works to become an official chapter in the storied franchise!

One of the many Kunio-kun games that remained in Japan was 1994's Shin Nekketsu Kōha: Kunio-tachi no Banka for Super Famicom. In addition to eschewing the series' usual super-deformed art style, it also marked the debut of Misako and Kyoko both as playable characters and as love inter-ests of leading lads Kunio and Riki. WayForward's Adam Tierney loved these girls so much that, when it came time to pitch a new tale to Arc System Works, he insisted that this duo take center stage.

River City Girls winds up pulling triple duty, tasked with evolving the tra-ditional formula for modern audiences, introducing Misako and Kyoko to confused fans and consolidating the conflicting plotlines of those games that were never localized. The solution was just to not stress so much and lean into the series' byzantine nature, culminating in an adventure that's equal parts homage and self-aware parody.

To ensure RCG is as fun as it is funny, Tierney invited Underground director and lead animator Bannon Rudis on board as co-director. His over-sight ensured that combat was fluid and nuanced, providing players untold ways to lay a beatdown on the violent denizens of River City. Add cameos by the Double Dragon crew (including Neon's scenery-chewing big bad Skullmageddon), a lineup of stellar voice actors and a heavenly synth-pop soundtrack by Megan McDuffee, and you've got what may be the best Kunio-kun yet! (It's thanks to RCG's popularity, after all, that Kunio-tachi no Banka will finally leave Japan as River City Girls Zero!) **— TONY**

ADVANCE WARS™

A Chronicle of Conflict

After 13 years of uneasy peace, Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp is set to reignite battles across Wars World. Prepare yourself by studying this full history of previous engagements!

Famicom Wars

IN AUGUST 1988, Nintendo mania had fully gripped the minds of America. Spectacular new NES titles like Life Force, Metal Gear and Double Dragon had just gone on sale. Nintendo Power magazine had just shipped its first issue! There was so much going on Stateside that no one spared a thought for what we might be missing on the opposite side of the Pacific: the debut of one of Nintendo's biggest and most impactful first-party franchises.

Famicom Wars rolled onto store shelves in Japan on August 12, 1988. Trailblazing a path into an all-new genre for Nintendo, turn-based strategy, the game offered a simulation of war boiled down to its simplest elements: There were two nations, Red Star and Blue Moon, and each was out to conquer the other through sheer, overwhelming military might.

Taking on the role of an army commander for one of these two warring countries, players found themselves faced with battlefields delineated into precise squares, each with its own defined terrain. The goal was to navigate through each landscape and capture the enemy's base in the area, forcing them to admit defeat and retreat.

Doing that, of course, meant deploying troops! Players were also given a budget to use to build and/or recruit units for their army, each of which had unique strengths and weaknesses. Common ground soldiers could capture the enemy's base (and other cities along the way, increasing funds for the war effort), but they were weak in battle. Mech units were upgraded with bazookas to pack more punch in a fight, but were more expensive to make and couldn't move as fast across the map. Tanks were tougher still, but even pricier. Aerial and naval units entered the mix in later levels as well, and a big part of the strategy became carefully balancing your budget against your immediate (and future) needs for your fighting force.

Famicom Wars, while slow, visually limited and unpolished by today's standards, laid the perfect foundation for future sequels to build on. And not even just sequels in its own series – after this game's release, its dev team at Intelligent Systems used the engine they'd build for it to create the first installment in another franchise you may have heard of: Fire Emblem!

If you're interested in playing Famicom Wars today, it's available in the Japanese Nintendo Switch Online Famicom app. Give it a try! **– LUCAS**

RELEASED: AUGUST 12, 1988 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Game Boy Wars

NOT QUITE THREE years later, the Wars raged on in a new location: the black-and-white world of the original Game Boy!

While its sister series Fire Emblem debuted on the Famicom and then also got a second game on that same system before moving on, the series that actually began its life by using the Famicom name – Famicom Wars – only ever got a single release on its eponymous hardware. Nintendo and the developers at Intelligent Systems decided to shift their attention to the handheld space, and since "Famicom Wars" no longer made sense as a name there, entry #2 in this saga became known as Game Boy Wars.

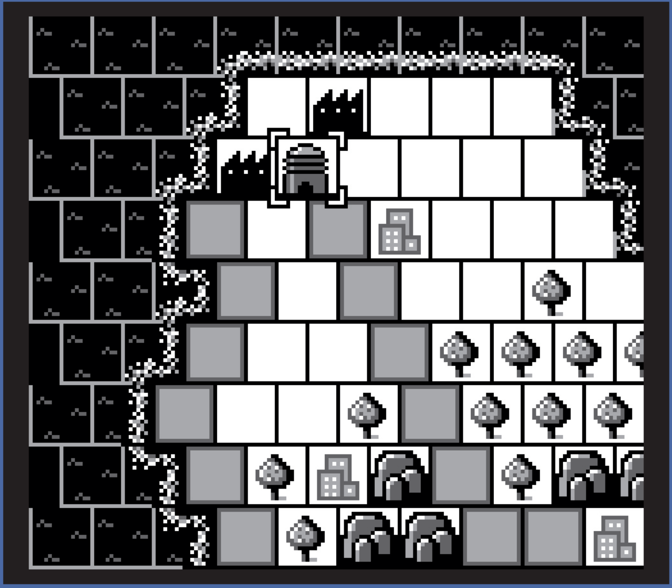
Another name change? The opposing army in this sequel was rebranded as White Moon instead of Blue Moon. Maybe since the Game Boy couldn't display the color blue? But Red Star's name didn't change, and Game Boy couldn't display red either, so who knows.

Maybe Blue Moon was canonically defeated in the first game, so White Moon was a different enemy army rising up to take their place? These first few series entries were incredibly light on story content, so the motivations behind these battles were mostly left up to the players' imaginations.

The biggest, most obvious change became readily apparent when the first battle began, though, and you can see it illustrated by the pair of screenshots below: Game Boy Wars, for some reason, totally overhauled the map configuration from Famicom Wars. The chessboard-like grid of perfectly aligned square-shaped spaces was swapped out for a hexagonal grid instead. Each space was still a square, but with every other row offset by a bit so that each square now directly connected to six others, instead of just four. It was a confusing and seemingly nonsensical shift. It made movement of units messier to understand: Directing them straight east or west was the same as before, but any deviation north or sorth meant dealing with all the new diagonals.

Game Boy Wars was also criticized by players for its laboriously slow enemy turns, as the opposing A.I. took far too long to "think." But that's the Game Boy for you: not exactly a wargaming supercomputer built inside.

This isn't really a release that's worth revisiting today, but if you're truly curious then importing an original cart may be your best bet. **– LUCAS**



RELEASED: MAY 21, 1991 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Game Boy Wars Turbo

WHEN THE NEW Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp was first revealed, Nintendo didn't immediately share any information about who was taking care of development. A little later, it came to light that WayForward had been charged with the job – and amidst my excitement for their studio getting handed the reins to an actual first-party property for the first time ever, I was also surprised that Intelligent Systems would let anyone else outside their own four walls lay a hand on the series they created!

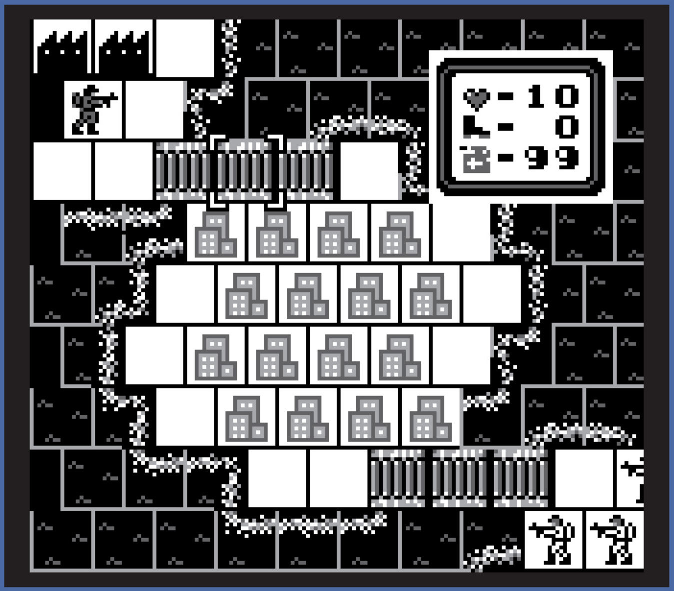
I was forgetting, of course, that it wasn't the first time it had happened.

Six years after Game Boy Wars made its debut in the early years of that system's life cycle, it was revisited for a revamped re-release as the sun was setting on Nintendo's no-color portable era. Game Boy Wars Turbo was the name of the all-new edition (taking a cue from the Street Fighter series, perhaps), and it was developed not by Intelligent Systems, but rather by Hudson Soft!

The "Turbo" chiefly referred to a speed increase that had been expertly engineered to address the old complaint that Game Boy Wars was just too slow. Apparently programmers' understanding of the handheld hardware had grown enough over the intervening years that, even though it was still running on stock, original Game Boys, the gameplay no longer had to take painfully lengthy amounts of time before deciding which next move would be best.

Game Boy Wars Turbo also included 50 new maps not seen in the original release – and if that wasn't enough, there were even more brand-new battlefields included in a special promotional version of the game released in partnership with Famitsu magazine. Readers of Famitsu submitted their map designs, then the best of the bunch got selected to actually appear in the game! In 1997, though, ages before DLC could expand games after they were sold, that meant an all-new round of manufacturing physical carts.

From a casual glance at eBay that I did just now, both Game Boy Wars Turbo and its Famitsu version seem to be available to own via auction – just be prepared to part with quite a few extra dollars to claim ownership of that rare magazine promotional edition. (Say, I wonder if we could make an NF Magazine promotional version of Re-Boot Camp happen?) **– LUCAS**



RELEASED: JUNE 27, 1997 PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: HUDSON SOFT

Super Famicom Wars

NOW HERE'S WHERE the series really starts taking shape and beginning to resemble the Game Boy Advance versions we Americans were first introduced to. Super Famicom Wars brought the brand back to home consoles, it brought development duties back to Intelligent Systems and it relit the fires of hope for Western fans that we might one day see this series ourselves – because at this point, we were definitely paying attention.

Little did we know that the series' Western debut would finally happen just three years past this point! But first, Super Famicom Wars did a lot of work to refine the gameplay, presentation and overall fun factor. This was a critical bridge between the series' origin point and what Americans got as our origin point on GBA.

Visually, you can tell from a glance at the screenshot below that Super Famicom Wars overhauled the look and brought it nearly to the point of Advance Wars, with big-headed chibified soldiers replacing the realistically proportioned troops of its predecessors and vehicle designs that are a 95% match for the looks we saw three years later.

This installment fully leaned in to the new toon-like style, peppering each battle with tons of short, cute cutscenes to illustrate the action. Loading an infantry unit onto a transport copter? You got to watch a little soldier leap and grab onto the whirlybird in mid-air before it flew away. Trying to capture a city already occupied by the enemy? Two soldiers would appear (one of each color) and play tug-of-war against each other. Resupplying a depleted unit with fresh ammo and fuel? Another cute troop would pop up and toss gas, bullet cases and even fresh-baked bread to his ailing allies.

Resupplying happened by using a fuel truck unit – a unit that later got cut from the mix in Advance Wars, as it refined and streamlined the lineup of vehicles. Other upgrades that hadn't yet been made here included being able to see the remaining HP of damaged units by default. Lots of lacking-polish moments like that stand out in Super Famicom Wars today.

But probably its biggest problem, and maybe even the reason it was skipped for release here? One of the COs in this game is literally Hitler. Oh, I'm sorry, "Hetler." Yeah, I'm sure no one would notice that! **– LUCAS**

RELEASED: MAY 1, 1998 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Game Boy Wars 2

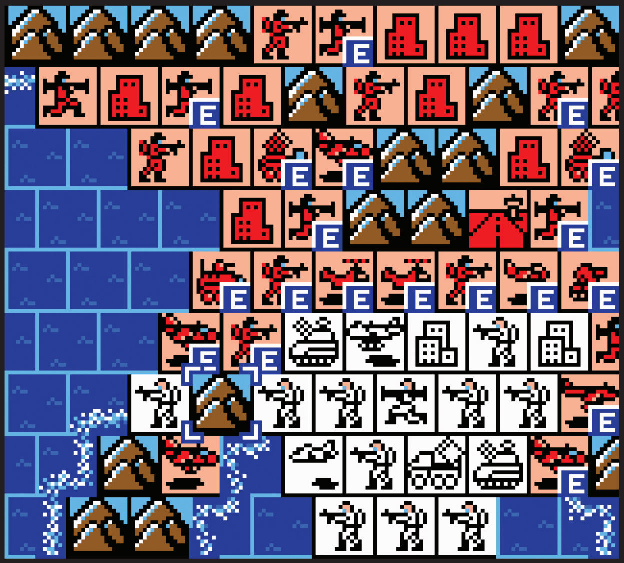
THE TIMING OF Game Boy Wars Turbo seemed odd – I mean, why wait six and a half years until the Game Boy is on its way out to revisit that release? Well, perhaps it was precisely *because* the Game Boy was on its way out. Hudson Soft saw that the new Game Boy Color generation was coming on the horizon, they wanted Game Boy Wars to have a presence in its launch lineup with an all-new sequel, and so they got started early with a revamp of the first game from 1991 to get their developers back in the right mindset to make more of this series.

It worked. With Game Boy Wars Turbo completed and shipped in 1997, and the critical work of speeding up its A.I. thought processes already accomplished, the same team was then able to quickly turn around and ship Game Boy Wars 2 as a Game Boy Color launch title in 1998.

Retaining the same look and gameplay as its portable predecessor(s), Game Boy Wars 2 mostly boasted a fresh splash of color as the biggest feather in its cap – pretty common among the earliest GBC releases. Color was the new, hip thing! What else did you need?

Well, a few gameplay refinements wouldn't be unwelcome either. Game Boy Wars 2 introduced a handful of quality-of-life improvements, like letting players see the full movement and attack range of a unit if they highlighted it with the cursor. (That seems like such a basic feature, but it wasn't a part of the earlier releases.) One of the previous games' redundant Artillery units was also removed, showing that just a bit of the streamlining that Intelligent Systems was in the middle of on their side of the franchise was also hitting home at Hudson.

But the biggest feature, and the one really meant to put the all-new Game Boy Wars 2 over the top, was connectivity with the Nintendo 64! Hudson Soft was hard at work making "64 Wars" in tandem with this game, and the two were planned to link together through the N64 Transfer Pak (most famously used by the Pokémon Stadium games). Unfortunately, that never became a reality. 64 Wars was showcased at Nintendo's 1999 Spaceworld event, but then cancelled at some point after that and never released. (Perhaps it's just as well, because it was going to bring the odd hex-shaped battlefields to the console. No one wanted that!) **– LUCAS**



RELEASED: NOVEMBER 20, 1998 PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: HUDSON SOFT

Game Boy Wars 3

AT LONG LAST, we've now arrived at the end of the Japan-exclusive era of the Wars series! At this point in the timeline, Advance Wars was *just* about to make its American debut on the Game Boy Advance on September 10, 2001. But literally less than two weeks earlier, one final Game Boy Wars game just managed to sneak its way into the Game Boy Color library before all the series' attention would shift to the next generation.

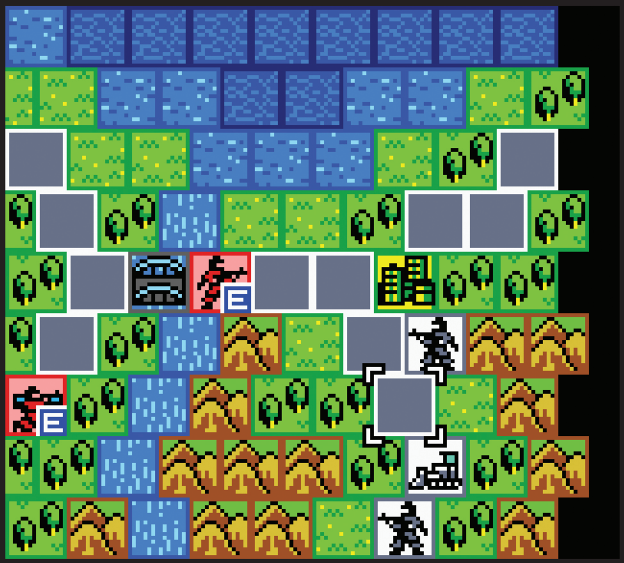
Game Boy Wars 3, to its credit, took great strides to separate itself both from the Advance game that would almost immediately steal its thunder and its own predecessors. Though the game looks the same as before (just with a richer and more robust use of color), some major gameplay changes were introduced here.

First up: materials. No longer were funds sufficient to purchase and deploy new units. Rather, players had to have saved up both enough cash to make a unit and the raw materials necessary to build it too. This brought Game Boy Wars even more in line with the Nectaris/Military Madness series, which was another Hudson-developed strategy franchise that was active for around 20 years beginning in 1989. (It also had a hex-shaped grid for its battlefields . . . was Hudson using Game Boy Wars to subtly influence players toward Nectaris for their whole tenure with the series?)

Another emphasis in Game Boy Wars 3 was unit promotion. "Ranking up" had been a part of past games, but in the wake of the success of the Pokémon series and its core mechanic of monsters leveling up and evolving into more powerful forms, Game Boy Wars 3 invested much more attention into this area. A unit that survived multiple battles and took out several enemies would gain EXP over time, and once it ranked up enough, it could become a Promoted unit with more powerful abilities.

There was even a splash of Fire Emblem's unit permanence here! Units that survived one battle could be carried over and redeployed in future levels – without having to pay the material cost to "make" them again. So playing earlier levels wisely and safely gave players an easier road to travel in future conflicts!

All in all, an impressive array of fresh features were found here, and as Hudson's last turn at the helm, that's praiseworthy. **– LUCAS**



RELEASED: AUGUST 30, 2001 PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: HUDSON SOFT

Advance Wars

A LITTLE OVER 13 years after the series began in Japan, the Wars brand finally arrived in the West! It's sad that we got a late start, as it would have been amazing to have been playing these games since the 8-bit era. But on the other hand, we got to instantly benefit from all of the revisions and refinements made along the way: There were almost no frustrations left in the formula by the time Advance Wars appeared, at last, in America.

But it almost didn't happen – again! Development on this game was begun with the intent of still keeping it as a Japan-only series. Thankfully, key employees at Nintendo of America got an early look at the game while it was still in development, they absolutely loved what they saw and they began to make a major push for the first-ever Wars game localization.

They succeeded. Any anxieties held by the higher-ups on both sides of the Pacific were pacified, the translation process was approved and the release schedule ended up being flipped such that Advance Wars would actually debut in the United States first, before landing anywhere else.

The release date for Advance Wars ended up being infamous. It officially went on sale on September 10, 2001 – just one day before the terrorist attacks that struck the United States on September 11. Had it been planned to arrive any later than it did, it's entirely possible that the game could have been cancelled outright, even in fully completed form – its cartoony take on war suddenly felt out of place in a world gripped by fear and the fallout of an actual attack on American soil. But the game was already out there on store shelves, and so it remained there. Its Japanese release was canned, though. (More on that later.)

Beyond the circumstances surrounding the game's release, we've got the game itself, of course. It's a masterpiece! It's brilliantly vibrant turn-based strategy made accessible to the masses. It took the gameplay core of its predecessors and perfectly refined it, completing the streamlining process of making just the right selection of different units available. It added truly critical quality-of-life additions, like the simple visual overlays (see below) that indicated a unit's full movement range, attack range, current stats and more. It was fast! The speed was snappy, keeping battles moving along.

By far the biggest addition to the series in Advance Wars, though, was its added emphasis on Commanding Officers. The trio of Andy, Max and Sami (seen on the front cover of this issue) were the heroes of Orange Star, and they – as well as their opponents – all had unique CO Powers that could turn the tide of battle in a blink. Add in a full single-player story that starred them all and you had something truly special here! **– LUCAS**

RELEASED: SEPTEMBER 10, 2001 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Advance Wars 2: Black Hole Rising

THAT BRAND-NEW FOCUS on story ended up being key to keeping the series rolling right away!

As we've seen through past pages, Nintendo only published one Wars game on Famicom, then one on Game Boy and one on Super Famicom. They allowed Hudson to come in and keep the Game Boy series going later on, but beyond that the Big N seemed fine with each of their pieces of hardware getting one Wars installment, and that's it.

But the story had to go on! Andy, Max and Sami had become beloved to players of Advance Wars, as had their CO counterparts in the rival Blue Moon, Green Earth and Yellow Comet armies. Ultimately, though, all of the colorful commanders were forced to join forces against a greater common foe: Black Hole!

Advance Wars 2: Black Hole Rising picked up the narrative at that same point, but saw the four no-longer-warring factions going their separate ways once again, as Black Hole launched a four-way simultaneous invasion into Orange Star, Blue Moon, Green Earth and Yellow Comet territories, and it was up to all of the COs who called those lands home to go back, defend their nations and drive Black Hole out. Structurally, this storyline was accompanied by the campaign being made nonlinear – unlike the tale that followed Orange Star alone in the first game, Advance Wars 2 put players into the boots of the other nations' COs as well, letting them choose which front to focus on first.

Gameplaywise, Advance Wars 2 was criticized when it debuted for not doing enough new. Only one new unit was introduced: the powerful and imposing Neotank, which now claimed the "top spot on the food chain" role from the previous game's heavy-hitting Medium Tanks. There were also Missile Silos, which foot soldiers could capture and then command to launch area-of-effect attacks (see below) as well as Pipelines, which were impassable walls except at breakable seam points (also see below). Past those, though, the game only contained new arrangements of previous terrain types and units.

Reviews at the time said things like "Advance Wars 2 doesn't deserve to have a 2 in its name" and "it feels more like an expansion pack than a full sequel" – valid critiques, perhaps. Maybe that's why when Japan finally got Advance Wars 1, it was bundled together with 2 in the same cartridge . . . and maybe why Re-Boot Camp is offering both of them as well! **– LUCAS**

RELEASED: JUNE 24, 2003 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Advance Wars: Dual Strike

DOUBLING UP WAS all the rage on the Nintendo DS, as Advance Wars: Dual Strike introduced the concept of using two officers at once in your missions! It's fortunate too, as the CO characters are varied and appealing, with the newest recruits bringing the total to nearly 30!

So how does pairing up work? The old COs all retained their trademark abilities, but you could only control one at a time, so determining when to swap between them became a new part of the strategy. For instance, you could deploy Colin's weaker units on the cheap for one turn, then swap over to Kanbei and utilize his additional firepower to give those discount soldiers a huge boost!

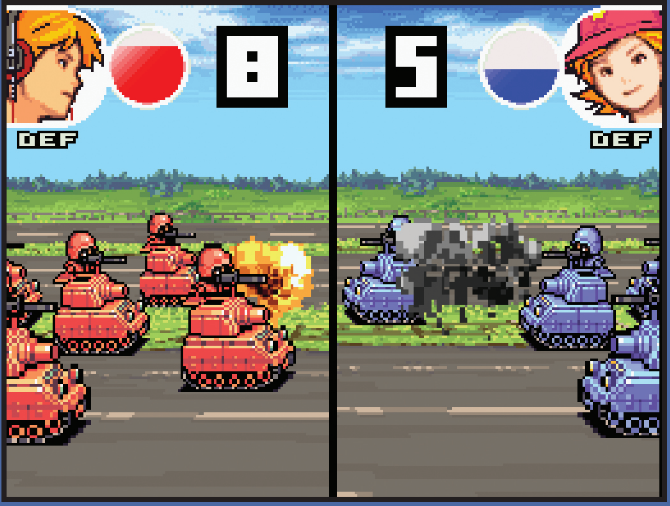
Beyond that, filling each CO's meter allowed the player to unleash a truly devastating Tag Power, which let you take two turns in a row, both while your Super CO Powers are active! That game element was slightly divisive due to its effectiveness, but I've always found it immensely satisfying to mow down the opposition in a single well-timed assault.

And if that's not your thing, you could just play without it! The unbelievably extensive War Room mode presented dozens of maps that you could handle any way you like: with or without skills or tag battles. And the more challenging the options you chose, the higher your EXP boost for your characters of choice, earning new skills and costumes in the process! It was a very addictive gameplay loop, and the game even kept track of your earned rank in each level within each option.

Beyond that, you got two Campaigns, three unique challenge modes based on limiting your resources, single-cart multiplayer versus (with over 100 unique maps) and even a quirky real-time combat mode! And if that wasn't enough, you could once again make your own maps.

Dual Strike was a triumph of content, easily boasting hundreds of hours of playtime for players who dared to attempt to 100% it. Its strategy gameplay, while admittedly not perfectly balanced, was so rich in options, units, characters and maps that there was truly something for everyone. And it worked perfectly as a handheld game to boot, inviting players to try just one more battle, or to take that new CO they just unlocked for a spin.

As an incredible culmination of everything from the past games, where could the series possibly go from here . . . ? **— MATTHEW T.**



RELEASED: AUGUST 22, 2005 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Battalion Wars

AS YOU'VE LIKELY learned from this fabulous feature, each iteration of the Wars series is tied to a specific Nintendo console. The Famicom, Game Boy and Super Famicom Wars games have different leads, different looks and a different general sense of style than the Advance Wars titles, and so on. For the GameCube, Nintendo decided to take the Wars series into a whole new genre: real-time combat. And that made for one of the riskiest, strangest games in the whole Cube catalog!

In the early 2000s, Nintendo couldn't ignore how popular war-themed first-person shooters had become. Call of Duty and Medal of Honor had become massive hits, but it was not in Nintendo's blood to make a realistic game about fighting and killing other people on a battlefield. So instead, they split the difference between the colorful, overhead strategy of the prior games in the franchise and the in-your-face, aim-and-fire combat that performed so well on those new-fangled, polygon-pushing machines. Battalion Wars would let you do both: direct multiple units into battle on a larger scale, while also controlling single units on your own, allowing you to get up close and personal with the enemy.

This new premise called for a whole new world, leaving Andy, Sami and Max from Advance Wars behind. This was a risky move, as those COs were essentially the faces of the franchise in the West. Instead, Battalion Wars starred a trio from a nation called The Western Frontier. They feel more like parodies of the American military than anything else. There's the stocky, blocky General Herman, Colonel Austin (one of the few Black protagonists in Nintendo history) and Brigadier Betty . . . a blonde teenage girl in a cheerleader outfit? Hey, if the shoe (or combat boot) fits, wear it. The bulk of the U.S. government's money has gone to the military for as long as I can remember, so I guess that makes them as close as this country gets to a "home team."

There are three other nations to engage with in combat, the most threatening being the nation of Xylvania. With names like Kaiser Vlad, Kommandant Ubel and Countess Ingrid, they were clearly riffing on German and Russian stereotypes. In fact, the whole cast is packed with Punch-Out!!-esque jabs at other cultures. The exception is The Solar Empire, the game's caricature of Japan. They come off as cool and classy.

It's not the kind of game that Nintendo would make today, but it still managed to do well enough, leading to a sequel . . . **— JONATHAN**

RELEASED: SEPTEMBER 19, 2005 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: KUJU ENTERTAINMENT

Battalion Wars 2

INSTEAD OF MAKING "Wii Wars" or some other console-specific evolution of the series, Nintendo opted to grant Battalion Wars a straight sequel, though they did manage to shoehorn the system's name into the title via the cutesy abbreviation "BWii." Going for a direct follow-up that utilized cleaned-up assets from the prior title was a lot cheaper to produce than starting over with a whole new look.

It also felt like Nintendo had some unfinished business to take care of. The original Battalion Wars did OK, all things considered, but being rolled out on the less-than-popular GameCube, and without online play, meant there was only so far it could go. The Wii was a different story. The console was flying off shelves, and Nintendo was struggling to make sure enough quality content was coming to the system to meet demand. Early hits like Red Steel and Resident Evil 4: Wii Edition showed Nintendo that Wii owners weren't showing up just for easygoing motion-controlled sports. They were also up for IR pointer-aiming action, and Battalion Wars 2 aimed to deliver.

At its core, the game is more of the same, though a few things are turned up a notch. There is a new territory to contend with, a place called the "Anglo Isles" that's clearly poking fun at Jolly Old England and its neighboring countries. It's a more racially insensitive moniker than anything from the first game, as it's basically a synonym for "White People Land." I'm sure no harm was intended, but I bet a lot of non-white people in the United Kingdom felt more than a little weird about it.

There are a few other small changes, like an even skimpier outfit for Brigadier Betty, and CO Colonel Austin being pushed to online-only modes. Weirdly enough, multiplayer is also an online-only affair. Not a great design choice for a console designed around the concept that "we" play together.

Still, the new stuff in BWii far outweighs anything it's missing. The Wii Remote controls felt fresh and futuristic, the new units like naval armaments were a perfect fit for island-bound battles, and getting to play cooperatively or competitively online, for free, was quite an amazing thing for a Nintendo console in 2007.

So why did the game fail to keep the young Battalion Wars sub-series alive? Why is it that a copy of Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn, another strategy game from Nintendo released on the Wii in the same year as BWii, is going for $160 on Amazon, while BWii can be picked up for $20 or less? Some of it likely comes from unfavorable comparisons to online shooters on the more powerful PS3 and Xbox 360; a symptom of the Wars franchise's larger struggle to find its place in modern gaming. It's not easy being too cute to sell yourself as hardcore, but also too violent and complicated to appeal to "casuals."

Perhaps, just as Advance Wars has earned a modern revival, Battalion Wars could find a way to return in the future too. **— JONATHAN**

RELEASED: OCTOBER 29, 2007 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: KUJU ENTERTAINMENT

Advance Wars: Days of Ruin

AND SO WE arrive at the end of the Advance Wars story – or what *was* the end before Re-Boot Camp was announced! Advance Wars: Days of Ruin, released nearly 14 years ago on the Nintendo DS, was built to be the best, most intense, most appealing entry in the series ever. Many would argue that it achieved all those aims and more . . . so why then did the brand go comatose after its release?

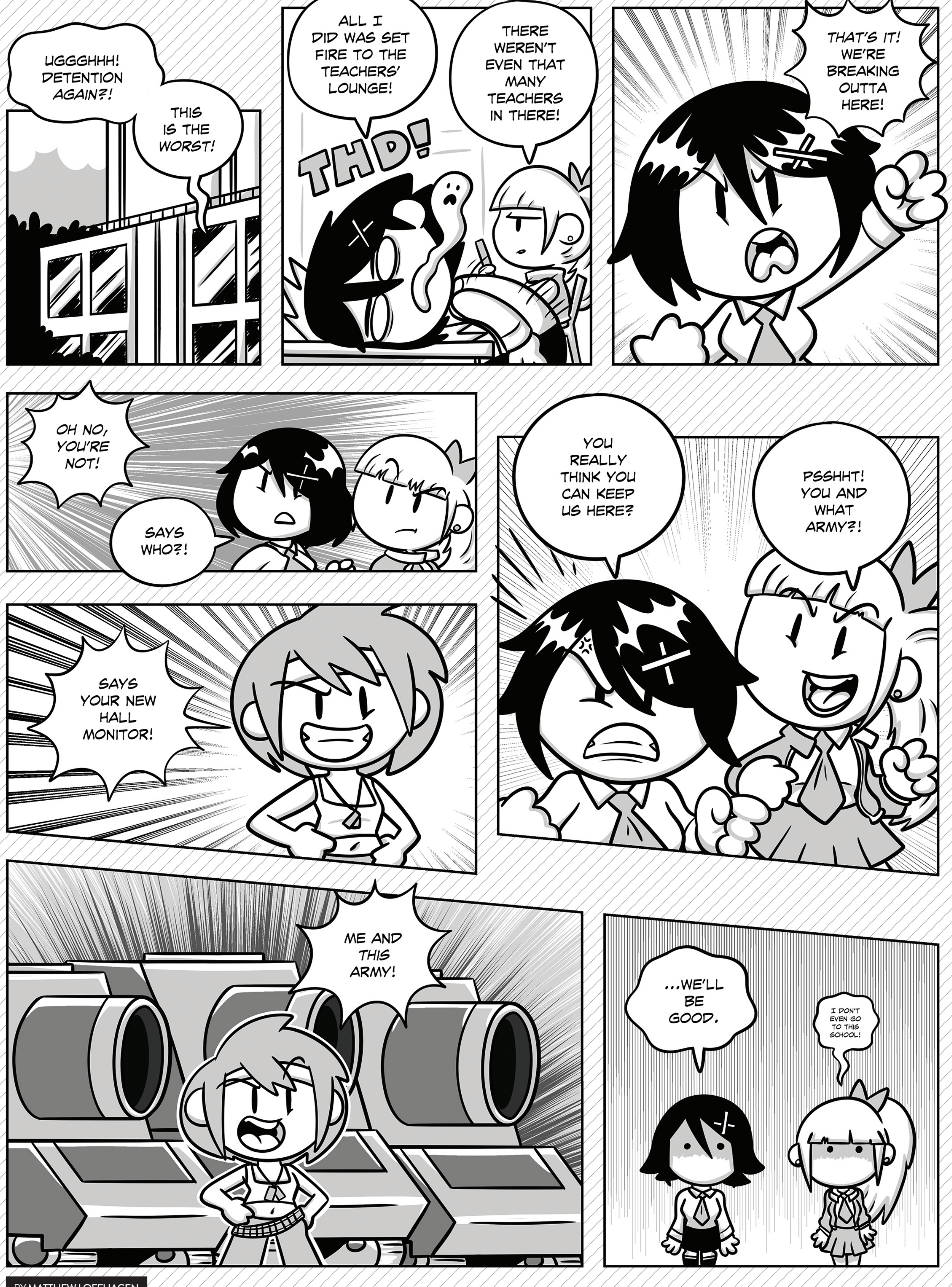
Days of Ruin is the "dark and gritty reboot" of the Wars brand. Many long-running video game series have an equivalent to this: when tradition and color and anything cute is cast aside in favor of presenting an edgier, bleaker world painted only in shades of grey. Nintendo, seeing that the Wars games had become more popular in America than in Japan, chose this direction because they figured this was what Westerners wanted.

It's not bad, as dark and gritty goes. Honestly, it's one of my personal favorites, rivaling Advance Wars 1 for best in the series to me. This game has an all-new cast fighting through an all-new, post-apocalyptic world. It's Advance Wars meets Mad Max, as the survivors of a globally devastating series of meteor strikes struggle to scratch out a life in the wasteland that remains. It's a story that really pulls no punches.

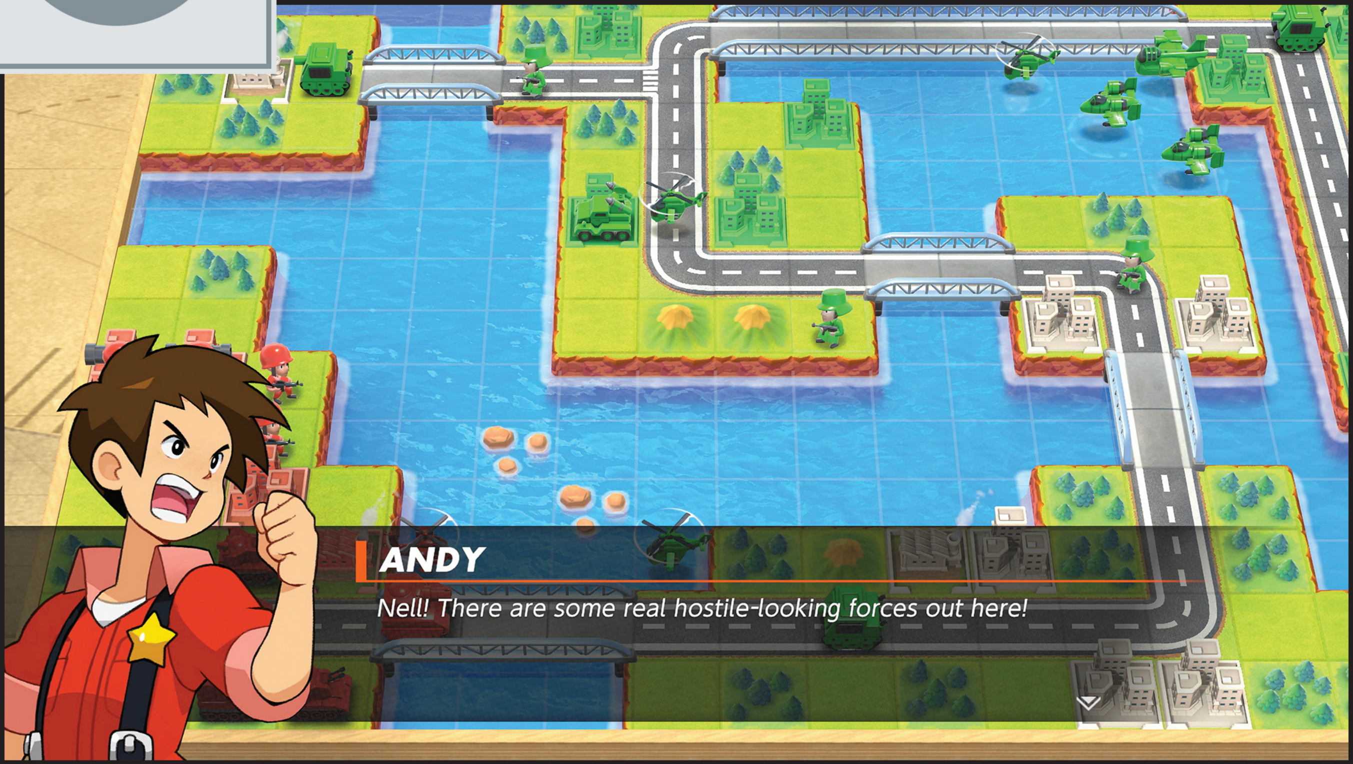
Gameplaywise, too, Days of Ruin sets itself well apart from the past by introducing a wealth of new units for land, sea and sky, as well as new types of terrain, weather effects and more. The COs are all fresh faces, and all with fresh CO Powers – but none as game-breakingly powerful as those seen in Dual Strike, since those were criticized. Commanding Officers in this sequel could even take to the battlefield directly, joining up with a unit in play and riding along, which triggered a boost in power for that unit and others in its immediate vicinity. Even Game Boy Wars 3 was looked back on for inspiration, as ranking up units with battle experience made a return here and became more important than ever!

I adored Days of Ruin and am still flabbergasted that a game of this high a degree of quality would not be followed up on for almost 14 years. The series just swung too far toward the West, I guess – Japan ended up having such little interest in this one that it didn't launch there until 2013. And only as a digital download then! The series that began with being locked down in Japan ended, ironically, with a Western exclusive. **— LUCAS**

RELEASED: JANUARY 21, 2008 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS



BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN



ADVANCE WARS 1+2: RE-BOOT CAMP

Retrain your troops, refuel your tanks and get ready to redeploy!

ADVANCE WARS IS BACK!

Nintendo has a lot of franchises. Too many, really, to keep them all in active service, seeing regular sequels every few years. So, every few years, we watch as a few big brands fall back in the lineup. They step aside while others step up into the spotlight . . . but sometimes *stay* stepped aside for so long that they kind of fall asleep.

Advance Wars has been one of the Big N's slumbering series for almost 14 years now. It's been a nap that's lasted *so* long, in fact, that it's stretched into the longest waiting period the brand has ever seen! Even the span of time between the series' Famicom debut in Japan and the American arrival of Advance Wars on GBA was less lengthy – about 13 years and one month, that was.

All that to say, we've waited long enough. It's time for Advance Wars to wake up! And, thankfully, that's precisely the plan. Nintendo has hired the talented team at WayForward to spark an all-new round of international incidents in Wars World by fully remaking both Advance Wars and Advance Wars 2: Black Hole Rising as the combined Switch adventure Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp!

STRATEGIC THINKING

Chess is as close as humankind has come to creating the perfect game. It's an endlessly replayable test of tactical thought that's so well refined that it's endured nearly unchanged in its rules for over half a millennium! The game we play today is essentially the same as players experienced in the 1500s. Or even before!

A game with that much historical weight has to have a huge influence on other games to follow, and in the turn-based strategy genre of video games, we often see game designs that are embellished spins on chess. Because what is chess? A distillation of a battle between two warring forces played out on a grid of squares.

That's what you get with Advance Wars. It may seem too complicated or even overwhelming to some at first glance, but it's really just a big board game like chess. Once you learn how each piece moves and attacks, you're already on your way to victory.

Advance Wars understood this better than any of its predecessors. Again, having the series show up here beginning in the '80s could have been cool, but placing the Western starting point in the GBA days turned out to be perfect thanks in part to Advance Wars' perfectly presented tutorials!

Look at Andy up there. Lovable goofball that he is, he just doesn't understand quite how warfare works when he first enlists in the Orange Star Army. Seasoned veteran Nell takes him under her wing through a series of training missions, teaching him (and by extension, the player) how each different game mechanic works, then giving him opportunities to test what he's learned. Advance Wars eases players in like a patient father playing his first chess matches with his kids.

Then the main campaign carries on with the instruction! New enemies and allies are constantly introduced, but one at a time, so players can always adjust. And by the end of it all, they'll feel like total chessmasters!

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: WAYFORWARD
RELEASE: SPRING 2022 RATING: E10+

A VISUAL OVERHAUL
I wanted to make the chess connection not just because of Advance Wars' strategic gameplay, but also because WayForward seems to really be leaning into the board game aesthetic for this Switch spin on the series. No longer are battles depicted from a total bird's-eye view, looking directly downward onto a flat battlefield. Rather, each fight appears to be floating, separated from whatever might have appeared beyond the boundaries of the engagement in the original games – and placed on top of a rectangular wooden box!

It looks an awful lot like the art style selected for Clubhouse Games: 51 Worldwide Classics on the Switch. It totally recontextualizes these conflicts, too – it makes them feel less like parts of a real raging war, honestly, and more like lower-stakes rounds of, well, a board game. Maybe that will help further ease in any newcomers?

That isn't the only visual shift, though, as layered on top of the action you'll also be seeing the Commanding Officers in a new cartoony animated style. Back on the GBA, these two Advance Wars games tossed flat art of the characters onto the screen when they spoke or activated their CO Powers, and there were animated emotional reactions tucked into the corners of battle scenes that let a bit of their personalities break through. In Re-Boot Camp, every CO gets detailed cartoon cutscenes when a Power is triggered, and even in simple dialogue scenes they'll have a lot more energy and emotion than before!

POSSIBLE GAMEPLAY CHANGES?
At first glance, Re-Boot Camp appears to simply be focused on that overhaul of the graphics of the games. How the battles play out seems to be unaltered – but again, just at first glance.

WayForward wouldn't be wrong to just keep the gameplay exactly the same as it was 20 years ago, and I think for the most part that's what we're going to get here. The maps we've seen from the core campaign seem to be an exact 1:1 match to the terrain and enemy placements that first appeared in the originals.

However, we may get some tweaks to how battles play out "under the hood," so to speak. Balance changes to the statistics running behind the scenes that determine how much damage occurs in each clash. For example, Max was an incredibly heavy hitter in Advance Wars 1: his direct-attacking units got a *50%* boost in attack power! A massive increase. In Advance Wars 2, that was toned down to be just a 20% boost. So in this two-in-one remake, we might get a unified Max that's a little less effective than before in the AW1 campaign.

Another under-the-hood alteration that seems likely: upgraded enemy A.I. The pieces may be the same every time and the board never changes, but a chess match will always play out differently if you have a different opponent! And in Advance Wars 20 years ago, it was often easy to bait the computer brain.

The APC was the MVP in AW1. Just a simple troop transport unit . . . but the A.I. was always drawn to attack it before looking at any other threats rolling its way. Like moths to a flame, enemy units would dash toward APCs to assault them, letting players in the know deploy them as decoys to allow the rest of the fighting force to roll on forward without harassment! That *just* might get a tweak in this remake.

MULTIPLAYER IN THE MIX
I'm all-in on this chess thing, now, so I'll keep rolling with it. There's more to Advance Wars than just figuring out how to outfox computer opponents in the single-player campaign! The real test of your tactical intelligence comes when, like chess, you're opposed by a human opponent.

Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp promises multiplayer support for up to four players at once, across dozens of maps. I'd assume local play on a single TV or tabletop Switch would be available for some kinds of battles, since everyone's moves are in the open to everyone else anyway . . . except if you want to play a Fog of War battle. For that scenario, when opponents' moves are obscured and units can hide in forests, everyone would need their own screen to maintain the secrecy.

. . . And I just remembered the submarines' Dive command! Even in non-Fog of War battles, subs can move in secret. So yeah, maybe plan on multiple Switches for multiplayer.

MORE ADVANCED GRAPHICS THAN GAME BOY ADVANCE?

A BEFORE & AFTER VISUAL VERSION COMPARISON

In order to illustrate the differences between the new Switch edition and the old Game Boy Advance version of Advance Wars, here's a nearly perfect comparison. These are the same moments on the same maps from the same missions! You can instantly see how faithful Re-Boot Camp is being: Every element is in the same spot that it first was 20 years ago. The new tilted take on the player's perspective means more of the map will be visible at once than before, though – in the lower pair of shots, you can see all the way to the upper bridge, which required scrolling before. Maybe a larger field of view will help you make better moves!

A DELAYED DEPLOYMENT

When we first began to plan for this November/December NF issue, the release date for Re-Boot Camp caught our eye: December 3. A timely choice to inform the theme and appear on the cover! But in a rare turn of events for a Nintendo-published title that had already publicly received a locked-in release date, Advance Wars 1+2 was delayed in late October. Bumped off of its December date and out of 2021 entirely as a result, the game is now due to debut at some point in Spring 2022.

Though it's a bummer to have to wait a little longer, delays of Nintendo titles almost always result in better, more polished final products. Re-Boot Camp will be better off in the end.

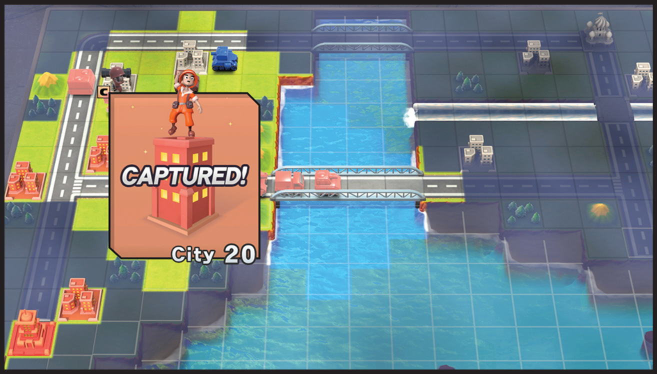
But it does make us wonder: Why? Nearly all of the game design here was seemingly finished two decades ago, in the original games. Shouldn't this project just be a straightforward task of updating the visuals and music, then rolling it back out to market for a new generation to enjoy?

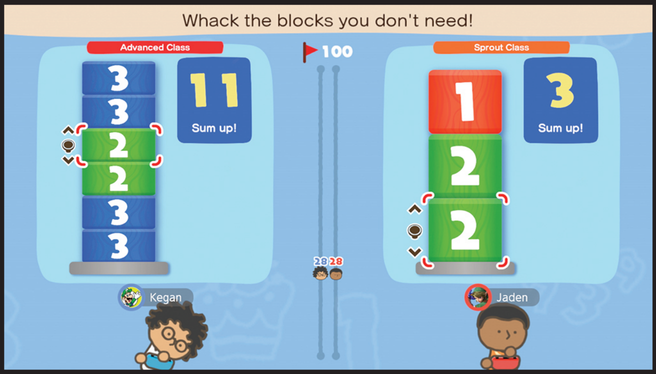
Well, if you're WayForward, it probably doesn't feel straightforward.

I can picture two possibilities: one negative, and one positive. On the negative side, it's possible that the WayForward developers just weren't able to finish their promised work on the original timetable. For any number of reasons, from pandemic impact to this just being the first time they've ever worked directly with Nintendo, it could have been a bumpier road behind the scenes than we've seen.

But on the positive side, I can also picture Nintendo being so impressed with WayForward's work and drive for perfection that they granted them an extension gladly. The Big N may have big plans for WayForward going forward! We saw MercurySteam work on a Metroid remake (Samus Returns), then get entrusted with telling an all-new tale in that series (Dread). Here, WayForward has been handed the job of reviving a piece of Advance Wars' past. Could it be the springboard to them getting to make an all-new sequel in the series next?

I'm crossing my fingers and making a wish on Nell's Lucky Star! Join me in hoping, and get ready to roll out in Re-Boot Camp in the Spring! **– LUCAS**





BIG BRAIN ACADEMY: BRAIN VS. BRAIN

Another sleeping Nintendo brand reawakened . . . it's time to go back to school!

IN AN ANNOUNCEMENT that nobody saw coming, the Big N has revealed that Big Brain Academy is coming back for a third installment – and that's a welcome surprise indeed!

The original Big Brain Academy released on the Nintendo DS during the height of the "Touch Generations" craze, which was a line of games designed to appeal to a broader audience, and included titles like Art Academy, Nintendogs and the original Clubhouse Games. It was followed up by a sequel on the Wii, aptly titled Big Brain Academy: Wii Degree, bringing with it the new addition of single-screen local multiplayer. Now, 14 years later, Big Brain Academy is back again.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RELEASE: DECEMBER 3, 2021 RATING: E

Big Brain Academy: Brain vs. Brain is bound for the Switch, and it's bound to unleash a bevy of brain-busting battles between your family and friends beginning December 3.

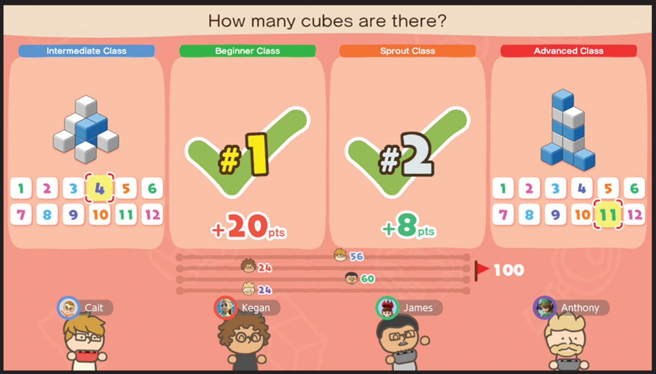
Like the previous entries in the series, Brain vs. Brain is a collection of brainteasing minigames. Everything from simple match puzzles to memorization exercises and number activities is represented here in a simple, charming style. Like the Wii game before it, the main focus seems to be on competitive play, but unlike its Wii counterpart, it looks like Miis have gotten the boot in favor of a new, original avatar style that's more in line with series mascot Professor Lobe's squiggly appearance.

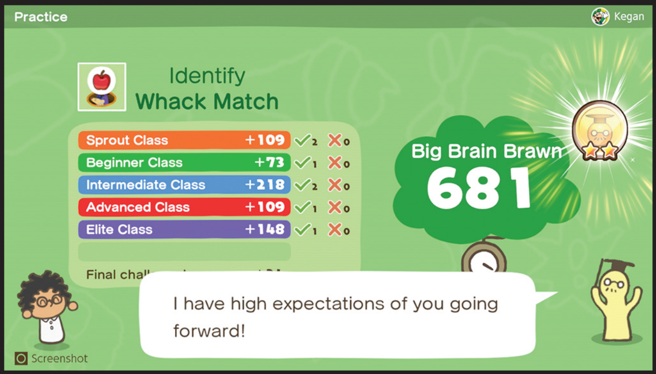
Lobe judges players on their performance based on five categories: Compute, Visualize, Identify, Memorize and Analyze. He uses those results to measure how "big" your brain is, and keep track of your growth over time. If previous titles in the series are any indication, it's going to be a great mental training tool, with all sorts of stats and challenges to keep you coming back day after day for more intellectual stimulation.

Of course, when approaching a game like this in a multiplayer setting, it would hardly be fair to pit your average 40-year-old against a 6-year-old. Fortunately, Nintendo has taken this into account with individually adjustable skill levels. These can be balanced on a player-by-player basis, so families of all degrees of intellect can compete on a level playing field. The exact age recommendations have yet to be revealed, so it's still unclear if, for example, a kindergartener would have a good time playing it, but in the right environment, Big Brain Academy could prove to be an honest-to-goodness fun and educational experience for the whole family.

The game promises to offer plenty of single-player content as well, including a new online mode where you can record your progress and upload it as "ghost data" for other people to compete against around the world. Most of what we've seen so far have been new iterations of previous minigames in the series, but hopefully there will be plenty of new activities for Big Brain veterans to dig into.

This was an unexpected announcement to be sure, especially when you consider that the Switch version of this game's brain-training cousin Brain Age still hasn't been released in the States, but if Clubhouse Games proved anything, it's that the Switch is perfect for this kind of content. Get ready to send your brain to school! **— KRIS**





POKÉMON BRILLIANT DIAMOND & SHINING PEARL

Another world lies beneath your feet!

I BELIEVE I may have undersold the expansion of the Sinnoh Underground.

Pokémon Brilliant Diamond and Pokémon Shining Pearl are nearly upon us, but we're taking one last look before their launch – and specifically, we're digging a bit deeper down beneath our Trainers' feet. One of the big selling points for this pair of remakes that we've previously pointed out is that the Sinnoh Underground area is being expanded. But I didn't realize the full scope of how huge that expansion would be!

Take a look at the full map of the Sinnoh region just above. Then, have a gander at the excavated version on the adjacent page. With the topsoil stripped away and taking a glance beneath the ground like we're using a gigantic X-ray machine, we can see the full extent of what's now rightly being referred to as the Grand Underground!

What was once a simple set of dirt tunnels in Diamond & Pearl's original DS editions has been transformed (or terraformed) into a region-wide criss-crossing network of caverns, corridors and subterranean biomes boasting a variety of different weather effects. How do trees grow with no sunlight? How is there snow down there? Who cares? It's all in good fun.

Clearly visible are areas seemingly dedicated to Ice-types, Water-types, Poison-types and more. Addressing again the old complaint that Sinnoh was too lacking in Fire-type variety, the developers of these revamps have insured that flame-spewing monsters get the largest of the underground lots – wild groups of Magby, Numel and Slugma are all visible in the art, and we know more Fire-types beyond those will be catchable as well. So feel free to leave Chimchar unchosen in the opening moments, because this time around you'll have other options!

I think I'll go for Magby myself, then raise it to evolve all the way into a Magmortar. Because the Trainer who's actually named Lucas in the Pokémon anime was a Sinnoh native who used a Magmortar!

Other Underground activities that are returning from the DS editions include digging in the dirt to unearth items like Fossils, establishing your own Secret Base that you can decorate with a variety of statues you discover and meeting up with other players to hang out together. (The Underground was the original online connectivity meet-up spot years ago, so it's still serving that same function now, even though such online features are no longer brand-new to the series.) Plan yourself an Underground playdate!

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: ILCA RELEASE: NOVEMBER 19, 2021 RATING: E

Not to be outdone by the attractions available under the earth, the surface world of Sinnoh has plenty of new surprises in store. Probably the most shocking, to me, is a surprising new addition to the Pokétch's apps!

The Pokétch – or Pokémon Watch – was the signature gameplay hook of Diamond & Pearl, as it leveraged the two-screened construction of the DS system and transformed the second screen to act like it was the screen of the interactive watch your Trainer was wearing on their wrist. Not just a time-keeping device, the Pokétch came packed with over two dozen different apps that each made training a little easier. One app kept track of your steps – useful for when you needed to walk a set distance to hatch eggs. Another helped you track down hidden items in the environment. Another let you keep tabs on how the Pokémon you dropped off in the Day Care were doing, no matter where you were!

All of those old functions should be back, but the new one that surprised me is the Hidden Moves app. In the old days, navigating the Sinnoh region meant needing to Cut down trees in your path, Rock Smash boulders that were blocking your progress, Surf across waterways . . . these were all Pokémon moves, and to use them, you had to have a Pokémon who knew them taking up one of the six spots on your active team. Inevitably, players adopted the practice of dragging along a non-battle-ready dummy 'mon like a Bibarel and just loading it up with nothing but HM moves in order to bypass these roadblocks. That stank.

But no more! In Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl, after your Trainer gains access to an HM like Cut or Surf, it gets loaded into the Pokétch's Hidden Moves app. Then, when you reach a spot where one of those moves is required to proceed, the app will call a wild Pokémon to use it for you!

No longer do you need to waste one of your six team slots because of the world being filled with HM obstacles. I've said I was down on Sinnoh in the past, but this huge boost to exploration speed and gameplay flow may be my favorite revision yet. Even better than the addition of more Fire-types!

There are even more improvements to uncover beyond these, and I'm now officially excited to try each and every one of them for myself. ILCA's done the impossible: They've actually got me excited to return to the Sinnoh region. Will they stick the landing? Find out in our next issue! **– LUCAS**

BLUE REFLECTION: SECOND LIGHT

This isn't your average summer school.

YOU CAN COUNT on Gust to include specific staples in their games: bright anime visuals, a thrilling soundtrack, some sort of crafting system and a cast of quirky characters.

The Japanese developer, known for its popular Atelier series, looks to continue in that same vein with their upcoming game Blue Reflection: Second Light. It releases November 9 on Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4 and PC and will feature Japanese audio with English subtitles.

Second Light is the second entry in this JRPG series following 2017's Blue Reflection for PS4, Vita and PC. The first game featured a cast of female characters whose lives revolve around a dichotomy of high school life and becoming Reflectors: magical girls who combat monsters from another world with stylish costumes and weapons.

From the marketing and footage shown so far, Second Light doesn't look to be a direct sequel to the first game and has its own separate story. It stars protagonist Ao Hoshizaki, who, after failing her final exams and deciding on summer school, finds herself in a mysterious academy surrounded by water.

The game looks beautiful and captures a peaceful summer setting, but there are darker events to come for Ao and the cast. After she and the other female students arrive, they discover they've lost their memories and must work together to return back to their world.

It's all well and good until a crack appears in the sky and dark creatures pour out of it! The game's most recent trailer showcases these monsters and how their presence has a negative effect on the girls' mental states.

While it doesn't seem like playing the first game will be necessary to enjoy Second Light, it will feature connections to both it and the 2021 anime Blue Reflection Ray: Blue Reflection protagonist Hinako Shirai and Uta Komagawa, a character from the anime, will make appearances in Second Light.

Second Light's gameplay will feature the same combination of school life activities and combat found in the first game.

Ao and her friends can improve the school through a crafting system. You hunt for resources, use them to build new facilities and furniture, then place them where you want, allowing you to decide how to make your ideal school setting. Crafting also nets new recipes, gifts and other items for combat.

Second Light has a real-time combat system that you'll use as you explore the Heartscape: an area with resources and monsters to fight. Ao and her allies unleash skills using Ether Points, and they increase over time in battle. If you build up enough EP, the characters transform into their Reflector forms, opening up new possibilities in combat.

You control three characters in battle at a time, and other allies offer support abilities. Battles also feature One-on-One Mode, where you face enemies head on, chain combos and activate a finishing move to deal lots of damage.

Second Light will be the first entry of the series to land on Switch, but if you played recent Gust games like Atelier Ryza and Atelier Sophie, I think you'll find plenty to enjoy in this one too! The game is available for preorder with digital deluxe and ultimate editions with cosmetic DLC. NIS America is handling the special edition preorders. They will cost $129.99 and include a collector's box, cloth poster, art book, notebook-styled photo album, two acrylic charms and a download code for an Atelier Ryza 2 outfit for Ao. **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA DEVELOPERS: KOEI TECMO & GUST RELEASE: NOVEMBER 9, 2021 RATING: T

DISNEY MAGICAL WORLD 2: ENCHANTED EDITION

The 3DS game for Disney superfans makes the jump to the Switch!

IT'S TIME TO board the enchanted airship and take off on the vacation of your dreams! Bring your camera, some mouse ears and plenty of pixie dust – you're invited on a magical trip to Disney World, courtesy of Bandai Namco and Nintendo! Disney Magical World 2: Enchanted Edition will be landing on the Nintendo Switch on December 3, and it's a remastered version of the original Disney Magical World 2, which was released back in 2016 for the Nintendo 3DS.

Mickey Mouse and his best friends – Minnie, Goofy, Donald, Daisy and Pluto – welcome you to Castleton, where your magical Disney journey begins. Like Animal Crossing, you have a house that you can decorate with all sorts of themed furniture, and you can dress up with colorful outfits and accessories, courtesy of Daisy Duck's Boutique, Chip & Dale's Workshop and McDuck's Department Store. Grow some flowers and fruit with Winnie the Pooh and Piglet in the Hundred Acre Wood, mine precious gems with the Seven Dwarves, dance in the Disney Princess ballrooms and do some surfing with Lilo and Stitch on the beaches of Hawaii! Good Disney fun.

There's also some spooky stuff going on: Each of the different Disney worlds you'll travel to has a ghost problem, and it's up to you and your Disney magic to traverse through mazes and dispel the baddies!

And there's a café for you to own and operate, where you can make adorable Disney-themed food and have characters perform a dinner show for your guests.

Search around town and collect enough puzzle pieces, and you'll be able to put on magical Dream Parades, with shining floats featuring lots of interactive elements and photo ops.

Last but not least, there are special events year-round – be sure to keep holidays and character birthdays (and your birthday!) in mind when you play! The Christmas decor will be out in full force at the time of the game's release – maybe Santa will even stop by?

I reviewed the original release of Disney Magical World 2 for the 3DS in NF #25 back in 2017, and found myself surprised at the amount of content, the music, the voice acting and the quality of the visuals – which I'm sure will look even better when playing on the Switch. The lack of licensed music for all the properties represented and the simplicity of the ghost battles will probably turn off more seasoned gamers, but there's something for every Disney fan here, including the classics (Cinderella, Snow White and Alice in Wonderland), the movies us '90s kids grew up watching (The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast and The Nightmare Before Christmas), and Disney's 21st century 3D animation works (Tangled, Frozen and Wreck-It Ralph). There are even appearances from some of the more obscure properties, like Marie from The Aristocats (she's very popular in Japan), the Three Little Pigs and the Three Caballeros.

While all the DLC from the original release will be included, it's not known if there will be any other updates to any of the in-game content, since both Frozen and Wreck-It Ralph have had sequels released in the years since the original game's release. But if you're a huge Disney fan that loves life simulation games, be sure to pick this one up! **– REBECCA**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: BANDAI NAMCO RELEASE: DECEMBER 3, 2021 RATING: E

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DOTEMU DEVELOPER: LEIKIR STUDIO RELEASE: TBA 2022 RATING: RP

METAL SLUG TACTICS

Still gunning, but no longer running. Metal Slug goes turn-based!

CARTOON TANKS! Expect to see them any time a game tries to balance the kind of cuteness that sells big in Japan with the militaristic, war-minded games that do great in the U.S. of A. Advance Wars, Dominion: Tank Police and Metal Slug are just a few examples of how explosively popular the concept can be!

Out of all of them, Metal Slug has shown the most staying power. First released in 1996 by defectors from Irem (Kid Niki, R-Type, Kung-Fu Master), the first three games in the Metal Slug series are widely considered to be among the pinnacle of 2D pixel art. To this day, the raw amount of detail and frames of animation, all on quarter-century-old hardware, is more than enough to induce shock and awe in dot art lovers everywhere. The success of those three games allowed the Metal Slug franchise to grow 19+ games strong, complete with remakes, demakes, crossover fighter appearances, mobile titles, 3D shooters and, now, a turn-based strategy game.

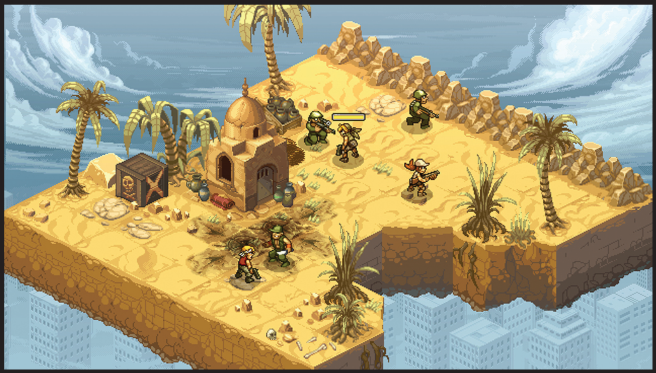
But the series didn't survive on its own merits alone. Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, also had something to do with it, and that isn't exactly a good thing. We won't get into details here, but you should know that the Prince, a billionaire, has been linked with all sorts of crimes and human rights violations. He also owns the Mohammed bin Salman Foundation, a company that recently purchased a controlling 51% of the shares in SNK (the holders of the Metal Slug intellectual property). So while Metal Slug Tactics isn't being developed or published by SNK, it's likely that they, and the Prince, will ultimately profit from it.

That has a lot of people feeling uneasy. Many in the press have refrained from covering any newly announced SNK titles in protest against the Prince, but if we're being real here, the success or failure of Metal Slug Tactics isn't likely to affect bin Salman very much. His family is estimated to be worth trillions. The families of the folks at Leiker Studio and Dotemu, the companies making the game? They're not quite as wealthy, and they're the ones who will be truly affected by the game's success (or failure). So there are cases to be made both for supporting the title and boycotting it.

But what about the game itself? Isn't that what you came here to read about? Well, the good news is, Metal Slug Tactics looks superb. The series has survived many twists and turns through its history, but in recent years, it hasn't exactly thrived. It's got huge brand recognition, but most still hold up the three introductory entries in the franchise as their favorites. With fantastic art direction, a return to familiar stomping grounds like the cartoon-ified Europe and (ironically) the Arabian desert, Metal Slug Tactics may have everything it takes to join that inner circle. It might even be able to suck in some MOBA fans, with its giant bosses, its rideable mechs and tanks and its loads of destructible environments.

The quarter-munching mentality behind the design of Metal Slugs of old doesn't really make sense in today's market. Moving away from the one-hit deaths and run-and-gun gameplay that the brand was built on just makes sense for a modern Metal Slug.

We just have to hope that the old mechanics once employed to tempt coin-packing players into paying for "just one more continue" haven't been replaced by similarly predatory lootbox or gacha hooks! We'll find out next year, when the game is planned to hit the Switch and other systems.
– JONATHAN



LOCALIZED LOOKS!

ADVANCE WARS
GBA, 2001 (USA);
2004 (JAPAN)

It's common for video games to adopt some visual changes when they're localized for different markets around the world, and in the case of the first Advance Wars, that's most evident in these six pairs of outfits! On the left of each of these comparisons is the look these Commanding Officers had in the American release of the game in 2001 – while the right side reveals how each outfit was altered when the game finally launched in Nintendo's home country three years later. (Actually, behind the scenes, the Japanese looks came first. The release there was just delayed for so long that it made it seem like the reverse was true!) While Grit simply swapped hats between regions, the other changes were far more drastic: Drake looks like a pirate rather than a respectable naval officer, Kanbei has suited up in samurai armor and Olaf is one step away from cosplaying Santa Claus! For the new Re-Boot Camp, it seems that WayForward has unified each uniform across all regions. Sorry to any big Santa fans out there! — **LUCAS**

HAPPY ADVANCEIVERSARY!

20 YEARS WITH THE GAME BOY ADVANCE

Two decades ago, Nintendo's portable powered up – and the impact of the GBA is still felt today!

IT'S HARD NOT to have a special place in your heart for the video game system you spent the most time playing as a kid. For me, that was the Game Boy Advance, and now Nintendo's beloved handheld has turned 20 this year!

While it may have debuted in 2001, the Game Boy Advance's legacy and the games that came with it continue to make a mark on the gaming world today. The most recent example is the upcoming release of Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp, the star of our cover and a remake of two Advance Wars games that first arrived on GBA in the early 2000s.

Other notable releases from this year: Metroid Dread and WarioWare: Get It Together! are connected to games initially released on Game Boy Advance. Dread is a sequel to 2002's Metroid Fusion, and Get It Together! is the latest entry in the series that began on the GBA with 2003's WarioWare, Inc.: Mega Microgame$! All of these connections serve as proof that the Game Boy Advance's significance isn't fading anytime soon. It was pretty special when it first released too, so let's take a look back at the console and what made it stand out from what came before.

A NEW HANDHELD GAMING "LANDSCAPE"

You could say that the Game Boy Advance's design created a new handheld console landscape . . . thanks to its landscape format!

I couldn't resist the play on words, but it's true – the Game Boy Advance was the first Game Boy system to feature a horizontal design. It was wider than it was long, and the buttons framed the screen on the console's sides. Its predecessors, the Game Boy and Game Boy Color, both had a portrait format where the buttons were placed below the screen.

This design change is significant because we haven't had mainline Nintendo handheld hardware that has deviated from this type of layout since then. Even with their unique designs and upgrades, the Nintendo DS, 3DS and Switch models all sport a landscape format and button placements on the sides of their screens.

The Game Boy Advance also had its issues at release. The lack of a backlit screen was a major complaint from reviewers and consumers. (No one liked having to fumble with those attachable screen lights back in the day!) This problem was later rectified with the upgraded Game Boy Advance SP, which released in 2003 and featured a brighter frontlit screen with a button that could switch it between two brightness settings. Its 2005 iteration had a backlit screen!

Speaking of the SP, it's one of many interesting upgrades within the Game Boy Advance family. The SP featured the first Game Boy with a foldable design, making it perfect for travel, and the Game Boy Micro proved to be even more fascinating with its tiny size and customizable faceplates for personalization.

The GBA also had a host of attachments. The Game Boy Advance to GameCube Link Cable allowed players to access new content, transfer items and use the Game Boy Advance as a controller for certain games. The eReader was an add-on attachment that read e-cards, which included anything from NES games to additional content like bonus levels, characters and items. I think the e-Reader and the cards that came with it definitely served as a predecessor to the amiibos we have today!

MAKING A MAJOR MARK ON BELOVED SERIES

The Game Boy Advance's extensive library had something for everyone, from beloved Nintendo franchises to licensed games representing fandoms from SpongeBob SquarePants to The Lord of the Rings. It was backwards compatible with older GB and GBC games too! You can check out a Top 8 list we made of notable Game Boy Advance releases on the next page, but I'd be remiss if I didn't dive into some of the special games that released on the system here!

The top seller is a good place to start. Pokémon Ruby & Sapphire claim that spot, selling more than 16,000,000 copies after releasing in 2002. The series' third generation marked some firsts for the franchise, including vibrant full-color visuals, changing weather

conditions, two-on-two battles and Pokémon competitions. The third generation may not land at the top of everyone's list in terms of Pokémon games, but its additions, especially the visual ones thanks to the Game Boy Advance's capabilities, showed how more detailed environments could meld well with the series' gameplay loop.

The Game Boy Advance was also home to some of the most adored and critically acclaimed Castlevania games: Circle of the Moon, Harmony of Dissonance and Aria of Sorrow. Konami's long-running gothic horror series has graced many systems, but having these three on the same Game Boy made for some blessed fans in the early 2000s. Their impact continues 20 years later, too, and they made their way to Switch in September via the Castlevania Advance Collection. (See Page 28!)

Another fun fact is that the Game Boy Advance features the most Mega Man games from any system, with 12 entries. Mega Man Battle Network launched with the GBA in 2001, starting a new series within the franchise that had six games from 2001 to 2005. Others include the four games in the Mega Man Zero series, a port of Mega Man & Bass (first released on the Super Famicom in 1998) and a Battle Network spin-off, Mega Man Battle Chip Challenge.

Looking back at the Game Boy Advance is a fun walk down memory lane for me. It provided so many fun experiences, from learning the ins and outs of farming sim Harvest Moon: Friends of Mineral Town to assembling the perfect deck of attack and spell cards in Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories. But now, I realize that this handheld provided more than just hours of enjoyment in my younger years. It's part of a bigger journey in how Nintendo's gaming vision has evolved from 20 years ago.

We can still see the impact of the Game Boy Advance both in its hardware design and improvements and through its games receiving remakes and ports 20 years later. I'm sure its influence will continue in the future, and the fun part is guessing what will be next.

If I got to pick, I'd love a remake or follow-up to Camelot's Mario Tennis: Power Tour, or to see a Sims game land on Switch since they've been on Nintendo systems since the Game Boy Advance days.

What's your pick? Think about it, and in the meantime, why not track down your Game Boy Advance and a fresh set of batteries to take it for a spin again in honor of it turning 20? Happy Advanceiversary! **— MAGGIE**

A TOP EIGHT FROM THE ADVANCE ERA

There's a seriously strong case to be made for the Game Boy Advance library being the single best set of games ever assembled for a generation of Nintendo gaming. Among the dozens of truly amazing releases, here are eight absolute masterpieces!

ADVANCE WARS

The Game Boy Advance had such a powerful impact that its "Advance" name is still attached to the Wars games today!

POKÉMON RUBY & SAPPHIRE

Pokémon's third generation set the mainline series' cycle in stone, as we're still seeing the same playbook followed today!

FIRE EMBLEM

Like Advance Wars, this strategy series never left Japan until the Game Boy Advance era. Now it's popular worldwide!

GOLDEN SUN

A spectacular original RPG series made by Camelot, and one that fervent fans are still hoping makes a return some day!

WARIOWARE, INC.

Wario already had his Wario Land platformers, but when the WarioWare series was born on GBA, he reached the next level.

METROID FUSION

An incredible Samus Aran adventure that remained the last in the series' timeline for nearly two decades, until Dread!

BOKTAI

The GBA launched plenty of all-new franchises and gave global life to many more, but it was also home to quirky experiments like this game's actual solar-powered cartridge!

MOTHER 3

Finally, perhaps the single most impactful GBA release is one that still hasn't been officially released outside Japan over 15 years after its debut. (But the fans took care of that problem!)

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

AS THE COLD winter months began to move in, it was only fitting that the cover for the November 1996 issue of Nintendo Power went to Dixie and Kiddy Kong making their way through the great white Northern Kremisphere in Donkey Kong Country 3: Dixie Kong's Double Trouble! Inside, it was joined by fellow 16-bit releases Maui Mallard in Cold Shadow, Williams Arcade's Greatest Hits, a bunny named Whizz and the Player's Choice release of Super Star Wars (based on Episode IV: A New Hope, for you youngling Jedi out there). The Epic Center provided more 16-bit coverage with a review of SimCity 2000 and strategies for Lufia II: Rise of the Sinistrals.

Meanwhile, Portable Power Players could take the competition's showpiece for a handheld spin with the 8-bit release of Battle Arena Toshinden, which was also Super Game Boy compatible! And while it didn't get much of a spotlight, Now Playing did spare a few words for Kirby's Pinball Land.

Of course, by this point, the talk of the town was the new Nintendo 64. To that end, numerous pages were dedicated to strategies for Wave Race 64, which also appeared on a poster backed by Super Mario 64 strategies. There was also a preview of Blast Corps, then another eight pages of the Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire comic book were here to lure you to the Dark side of the Horse. *(Get it? The comic was published by Dark Horse. It's funny!)* Finally, sports fans got a peek at the future in Pak Watch with previews of Wayne Gretzky's 3D Hockey, Major League Baseball Featuring Ken Griffey Jr. and NBA Hangtime.

Speaking of NBA Hangtime, the winner of this issue's Player's Poll would get all the Hangtime in the world, as they'd win the arcade cabinet and the SNES and N64 versions of the game. Five second place winners didn't get the arcade unit, but did get the others, as well as an official NBA game ball from Spalding.

In the midst of it all, NP covered a different type of game. Magic: The Gathering introduced the world to collectible/trading card games in 1993, and they've only grown in popularity since. Here in 1996, Nintendo tried to get in on some of that action by partnering with Topps to present a CCG based on Killer Instinct, and to get fans of KI started, they showed off how the game was played, and even included a special card with this very issue! (KI didn't quite catch on as a card game, but maybe Nintendo will have better luck with another property someday.)

For December's issue, the cover feature went to Jago and Kim Wu from Killer Instinct Gold, the home version of the arcade game Killer Instinct 2. In addition, eight more pages of the Shadows of the Empire comic were joined by six pages of the Shadows of the Empire game *and* a Shadows of the Empire poster! Wayne Gretzky's 3D Hockey hit the ice and NBA Hangtime hit the court on Nintendo 64, while more Wave Race coverage occupied the back half of the poster insert.

In the lands of lesser-bits, we got to see Part 2 of NP's DKC3 coverage, Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3 and a boatload of sports games for the Super NES in Sports Scene. On the Game Boy side of things, you could go back down under in Taz-Mania 2, match wits against someone who definitely was not Alex Trebek in Jeopardy! Platinum Edition or Jeopardy! Teen Tournament, or throw the pigskin around in the one GB game from this issue's Sports Scene, Madden '97.

If the tips for Wave Race 64 weren't enough to up your game, perhaps some real-life practice would do the trick? Player's Poll participants had a chance to win just that, as the grand prize featured an actual Kawasaki 750 ZXi Jet Ski, along with some matching gear and, of course, a copy of the game.

Finally, Pak Watch helped close things out with an exclusive two-page preview of what was one of the most anticipated games coming to the Nintendo 64: the newly rechristened Mario Kart 64! (Out with Kamek, in with Donkey Kong!) Our 64-bit appetites were further teased with peeks at FIFA Soccer, Cruis'n USA and Dark Rift, and word that production of the popular platform would more than double by the holiday season!

So closed another year in NP history. Up next, venturing back into 1997! **— DAVID**

ISSUE #90: NOVEMBER 1996

ISSUE #91: DECEMBER 1996

EARLY INFINITY SAGA

A storyline that is adapted on a recurring basis is that of The Infinity Gauntlet. Fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe may recall it from the movies Avengers: Infinity War and Avengers: Endgame, but as one might expect, adaptations of the 1991 comic event go back many years, including two from Capcom in the mid-'90s. The better known of these may be Marvel Super Heroes, a 1995 arcade fighting game in the same vein as X-Men: Children of the Atom. But in 1996, Super NES fans got their own chance to take down Thanos in Marvel Super Heroes: War of the Gems, an action platformer in which players performed moves with fighting game-styled commands. While not available on any current console, Arcade1Up re-released it as part of a Marvel-themed cabinet in 2020.

LOST IN UNTRANSLATION
KNIGHT MOVE

Nintendo's chess puzzler never hopped its way to the States.

ORIGINAL RELEASE: FAMICOM DISK SYSTEM, JUNE 5, 1990 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: JV DIALOG

PLAYING IT TODAY

With the only official release still being the original Famicom Disk System disk, this is one of the most difficult of Nintendo's first party-published games to play legitimately today. Especially if you don't live in Japan! Since it's been over three decades, I think you can emulate Knight Move with a clear conscience – if Nintendo had any intention of ever selling it in the West, they would have done so by now. Fingers crossed it gets added to the NSO lineup, though! That would be its best way forward at this point.

THE PC SEQUEL

Five years after Nintendo declined to bring Knight Move to a worldwide audience, Alexey Pajitnov took his idea elsewhere. Partnering with Kinesoft Development and Spectrum Holobyte, Alexey released "Knight Moves" (note the plural there) as a PC game in 1995. Gone was the horse-shaped playing piece, replaced by an actual human knight who hopped awkwardly around the board. Enemies were added to increase the tension, and the objective was changed to collecting coins to activate a goal tile rather than just score chasing.

EARLIER IN THIS ISSUE, I made the case for a connection between Advance Wars and chess. Also earlier in this issue, I lamented the fact that the Wars series was passed over for worldwide release for years before it finally managed to leave Japan in 2001. Now, let's combine the two: Presenting an actual chess game that Nintendo also never translated for Western release!

Knight Move was a puzzle game released exclusively for the Famicom Disk System in Japan in 1990 . . . then never seen again. It never made it to any other regions (which is why we're talking about it here), but even within Japan it's never been re-released through the last 31 years. That's surprising, too, given the game's incredible pedigree: It was created by the legendary inventor of Tetris, Alexey Pajitnov!

Tetris was such a phenomenal masterpiece of video game design that even its own creator has struggled for decades to catch its same lightning in a bottle for a second time. Still, Alexey's many other puzzle designs each have their own merit. Knight Move is a particularly interesting one, because it was built on the back of a gameplay mechanic that's been a part of the human experience for over 500 years: the wacky way that knight pieces move on a chessboard. They hop!

Every different piece in chess moves in a perfectly straight line. Some straight across rows and columns, and some diagonally (and some both), but every piece takes a direct path from where they are to where they're going, colliding with any opposing pieces they meet along the way. But not the knight! Knights hop, leaping up and over enemy lines to arrive at their destinations with no collision occuring in transit. In addition, they move in an "L" shape: When they land, it's never on a spot that's directly straight ahead of *or* directly diagonally placed from where they began. It's always two spaces over, then one space up. Or one step right, then two steps back. (You probably know how to play chess and don't need me to explain further.)

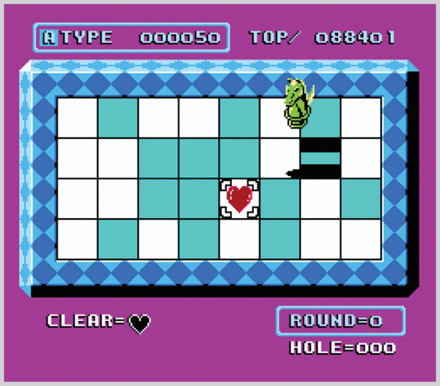
Anyway, Alexey was inspired by the knight's move to make, well, Knight Move. In this puzzler you command a single knight chess piece and must hop across a grid of squares, one L-shaped jump at a time, in order to try to land on as many different tiles as possible.

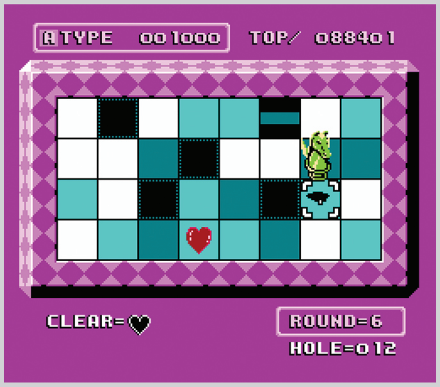
It's tougher than it sounds! Unlike in friendly games of chess when you can take your time before making your next move, the knight in Knight Move is constantly moving. It leaps into the air again immediately after landing on a tile, then hovers there (using a pair of tiny wings) as it waits for you to choose where it's going to land next. If you take too long, though, wherever the cursor is set is where it will drop!

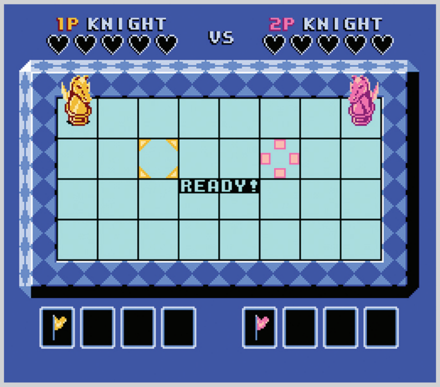
The goal, as in Tetris' Endless Mode, is to rack up as high a score as possible before you ultimately fail. That happens when your little horse (or little pegasus, I guess, since it has wings?) lands in a hole. And *that* happens when you've landed on the same tiles so much that they fall away. At the beginning, all the tiles are white. Land on one once and it flips to a light teal color. Hit it again and it flips to dark teal . . . then a third time and it falls away, leaving nothing but the void below!

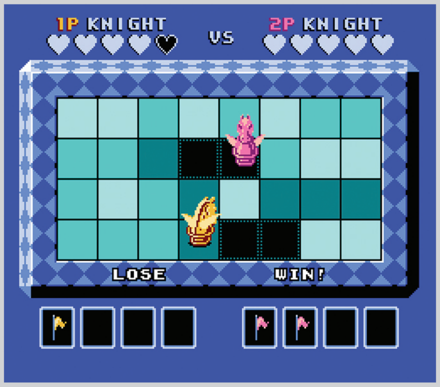
Luckily, fallen tiles can be restored by grabbing the heart that's placed somewhere on the board. You want to wait to grab it, though, because you increase your score faster if you play riskily, stomping on a whole string of dark teal tiles and staring certain death in the face like the valiant knight you are!

Knight Move is frantic and fun, and it's a shame it was never allowed to move to the NES! **— LUCAS**









REST O

the sitcom starring a final boss and an obnoxious '90s video game mascot

by LLK

BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING

DATE & PLACE OF BIRTH
I was born in Pennsylvania on March 1, 1970 in a suburb of Philadelphia.

FAVORITE FOOD
It's a toss-up between sushi and ice cream, although I haven't figured out a way to combine them into a single dish that's palatable yet.

LITTLE-KNOWN FACT
I used to dance professionally as part of a dance team called "Swing Shift." We performed all over Southern California doing classic American dances, such as the Lindy Hop, Jitterbug, Two-Step, Shag, Shim Sham, Big Apple, East Coast Swing, etc.

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
I'm currently the CEO of WayForward, although I am more commonly known as the Tyrannical Overlord. As a bit of trivia, our creative director, Matt Bozon, gave me that title back in the mid-'90s after reading the Clark Oppenheimer issue of The Tick (I think it was Issue #2).

BEST KNOWN FOR
Founding WayForward!

VOLDI WAY

Gaze, ye mortals, upon the mighty visage of the Tyrannical Overlord who rules WayForward with an iron fist!

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NF: You were a child actor! Did any of your experiences as a performer help point you toward your current work at WayForward?
VOLDI: Hahaha . . . I doubt it. My personality is definitely not geared toward acting. Most of my acting work was doing bit parts in commercials and TV shows, such as CHiPs, Happy Days, Marie Osmond's Christmas Special, various soap operas, etc. I was also in dozens of commercials for brands like KFC, Popeyes, McDonalds, Burger King, Hostess Twinkies, etc. (Fast food companies always need child actors.) It's easy to be an actor when you're young, because children grow so fast, they can only portray a very narrow age range. Also, there isn't as much competition because of the commitment required by the parents. Fortunately, my father was willing to drive me to an average of four to five auditions per week, so I had pretty steady work from ages 7 to 11. My most challenging role was when I played the part of Joseph Carmichael in The Changeling, a horror film from 1980, since I was completely naked and submerged underwater in most of my scenes. That one had to be filmed in Canada in order to circumvent the more restrictive child labor laws in the United States.

How and why did you segue into game development? Were there any particular games that influenced your decision, or life-altering events that put you on that path?
Until 1982, my #1 goal in life was to be on the Olympic gymnastics team. I was already on the junior Olympic team, and was training to be in the 1988 Summer Olympics. Then when my father remarried in 1982, we moved to Orange County. I was so loyal to my team in Los Angeles that I stubbornly vowed to quit gymnastics entirely before I would consider switching to a different team. Unfortunately, Orange County is just far enough from Los Angeles that I couldn't convince my father to make the drive, and that began my transition into more cerebral activities.

In Orange County I met a kid who had just bought a Commodore 64, and I spent pretty much every waking moment at his house. The operating system for the C64 was BASIC, so I had no choice but to learn how to program. My friend and I started by typing in source code for games we found in Compute Magazine (yes, back then source code was sometimes published in print magazines). After a while, we started modifying the source code to make our own games, and ultimately just started creating them from scratch.

It looks like the first licensed game you ever worked on was for Disney, starring none other than Mickey Mouse, the most famous cartoon character in the world! (No pressure, right?) In terms of working on games in big franchises, how do you top that? And what did those early experiences working with Disney teach you about how to make great games with pre-established characters?
Before Mickey's Ultimate Challenge, a programmer like me could create the art/animation as well (think about games like Pac-Man, Centipede, Asteroids, Missile Command, etc.). That was the first project I worked on that required actual artistic talent, which I certainly lacked. My girlfriend's brother was going to CalArts, and he introduced me to Rob Buchanan. Rob then introduced me to his roommate, Matt Bozon. Together, Rob and Matt created all of the art/animation for Mickey's Ultimate Challenge. Incidentally, the three of us are still working together today.

It's pretty rare to see someone successfully switch from in-the-trenches game development to a position in management and publishing. Satoru Iwata and Gabe Newell are a couple of examples when it worked, but there is a list 10 times as long of times when it didn't. How was that transition for you, and what do you think it takes to do it effectively?
Programming is my favorite thing to do in the world. I still get to do little bits of programming several times per week, but it's typically on internal systems, such as our project management/task tracking system, sales reporting, payroll, etc., so it's not nearly as glamorous as gameplay programming, but I still enjoy it. On the management and publishing side of things, I've been fortunate to be surrounded by geniuses in those areas, like Chris Watson (our COO) and Adam Tierney (our CBO). Prior to Adam, John Beck was hugely instrumental in getting us to where we are today.

Do you remember the moment when you realized that WayForward had really "made it?"
Hahaha . . . We certainly haven't "made it," but thank you for saying that! We're constantly trying to improve, but we still have a very long way to go before I might agree that we actually "made it."

LICENSED GAMES . . .

For over 30 years, Voldi's led WayForward with a sensibly ingenious pendulum swing of a development strategy. First, the studio works with established brands like the dozen examples seen below . . .

MICKEY MOUSE

BARBIE

GODZILLA

WWF (WWE)

RESCUE HEROES

SPONGEBOB

LOONEY TUNES

ALIENS

THE SMURFS

TMNT

BAKUGAN

RWBY

. . . FUND THE ORIGINALS!

. . . then they funnel the funds earned from those licensed games toward building development budgets for all-new, original ideas that are wholly owned by WayForward. Like the ones seen here!

XTREME SPORTS

SHANTAE

LIT

SIGMA STAR SAGA

MIGHTY FLIP CHAMPS

MIGHTY MILKY WAY

MIGHTY SWITCH FORCE

WATCH QUEST

SPIDERSAURS

MARBLE KNIGHTS

VITAMIN CONNECTION

WayForward has become a studio that can take on any genre in gaming. Was there a deliberate approach in leadership to ensure that the company would become well-rounded enough to move "forward" with anything that came its "way?"

Excellent wordplay! The bulk of any game development team consists primarily of programmers and artists, and there is a lot of overlap between skill sets regardless of genre. The biggest differences are with design, and fortunately, our directors have been amazing at deeply immersing themselves in similar games until they can nail the design. There are certainly some genres we've struggled with, but given enough time, we tend to prevail.

What's your perspective on balancing work on original, WayForward-owned games with projects with external partners with established intellectual properties? I'd assume both types of projects have their strengths and weaknesses.

Our original games are throttled by funding, so we can usually only afford to develop one or two per year. When it comes to external projects, we have become extremely picky about which ones we take on, and if we can't get enough buy-in from our team, we will turn them down.

How do partnerships with other companies and other IPs generally come about? Does WayForward approach them with game ideas? Do they come to you first? Do you accidentally bump each other in the hallway, drop all your textbooks and then smile shyly as you help each other pick up the piles before having to dash to your next class?

Aw . . . that last one would be a very sweet way to form partnerships. I hope that has actually happened to someone! In our case, it's a combination of the first two. Sometimes, we'll get inspired to pursue a particular brand, and other times, IP owners will come to us (or publishers who have licensed the IP).

What does it feel like to be told "Yes, we want to work with you!" and then you get to actually be entrusted with worlds and characters that have been around for decades? Worlds and characters that have formed foundational childhood memories for so many!

We take that responsibility very seriously! Most of the games we work on are for brands that we are in love with, so the passion is built-in from the start. Even for brands that might seem like an odd fit, such as the myriad of kids games we have worked on over the years, we try to assign team members who have kids of their own who can be their inspiration. Even if the brand itself isn't inherently inspiring, we try to model the gameplay after games that have inspired us. For example, we worked on multiple Barbie games where we modeled the game design after classics, such as Zelda II, The Lost Vikings, The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past, etc. We were proud that, in our own small way, we were able to expose 6- to 9-year-old girls to the game mechanics that inspired us to become game developers in the first place.

Where's WayForward going from here? Not curds backward I hope!

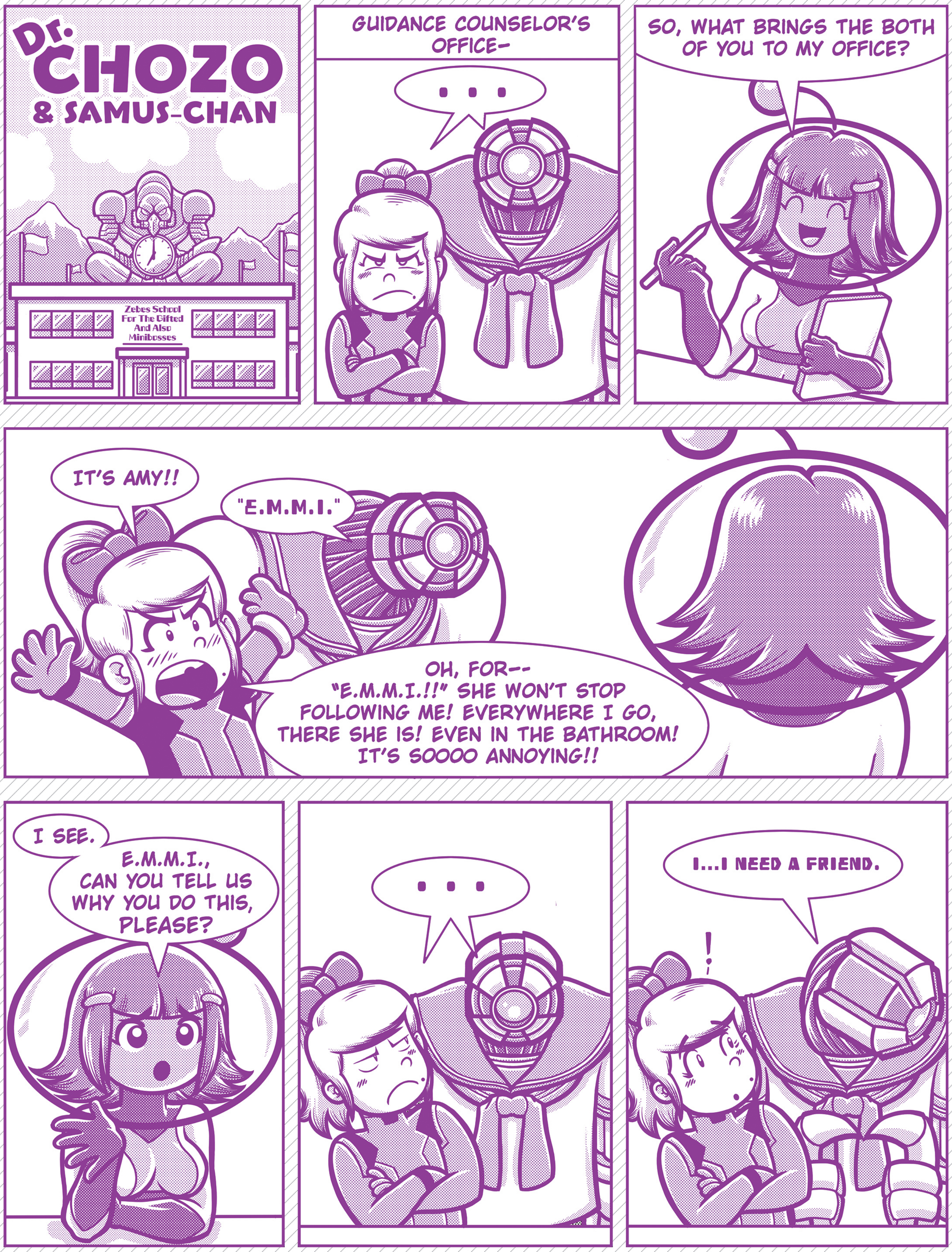
Curds and whey . . . hahaha, I see what you did there! Well, we are best known for creating compelling 2D action platformers, and definitely want to continue that, but we would also love to expand our repertoire to include 3D action-adventure games as well. Games like Super Mario Odyssey, Ratchet & Clank, Tomb Raider, Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order, the Batman Arkham games, etc. have always been huge inspirations, but the budgets required have tended to be beyond our reach. Hopefully one day we'll be able to change that.

Are there any other brands or franchises you'd like to work on? Or how about: What's the most obscure bit of media that you personally love, and that you'd love to see become the basis for a WayForward-made video game?

Oh wow, that list could be a mile long! It's so hard to choose! In fact, I'm going to dodge the question by saying that I'd love to work on a game that could be perpetually expanded to include other brands, such as Super Smash Bros. There's a Roblox game called Anime Battle Arena, which includes every anime fighter you can imagine. Of course, it's completely unlicensed, but the game itself is incredible. My dream would be to work on a game like that, only for modern consoles, and with every character being 100% legit.

Finally, if you could have one superpower, what would it be and why?

To be immortal, so I could live long enough to play all the games in my library I haven't had time to play. NF



BY THOR THORVALDSON

REVIEWS

After 19 long years, the story of bounty hunter Samus Aran finally continues in the all-new and incredibly anticipated **Metroid Dread.** Does it live up to nearly two decades' worth of hype? Find out in our full review!

Samus Finally Moves Forward
METROID DREAD

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPERS: MERCURYSTEAM & NINTENDO EPD RATING: T

AFTER NEARLY TWO DECADES, Metroid 5 has finally arrived! Not only is this the fifth mainline 2D adventure in Samus' spacefaring odyssey, it's also the elusive Metroid Dread whose existence Nintendo has only vaguely acknowledged over the last 16 years. Why the long wait? Turns out series producer Yoshio Sakamoto had been looking for the right tech and the right crew to realize his vision!

That crew turned out to be Spanish development team MercurySteam, whose impressive work on the Metroid II remake Samus Returns earned them the privilege of crafting an original title. Everything they introduced in that 3DS episode has been built upon – in fact, it wouldn't be inaccurate to declare that Dread is as much a direct sequel to Samus Returns as it is a narrative follow-up to Metroid Fusion.

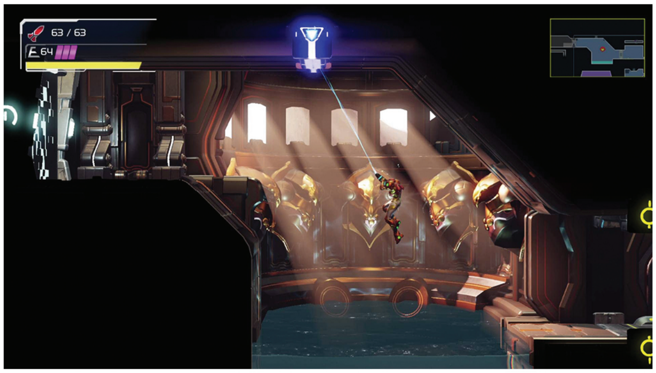
Samus Returns expanded our heroine's fluidity with full 360° aiming and melee counters. Both have returned in Dread, only now Samus can melee while in motion, eliminating the need to wait for enemies to make the first move. Furthermore, she can slide through narrow passages while maintaining momentum and automatically vault over block-high obstacles. These tweaks may seem minor at first, but the streamlined mobility allows for more exciting moment-to-moment traversal.

Expediency is the name of the game, aided in no small part by the Switch's robust controller layout which maps every one of Samus' abilities to a dedicated button (or button combination). No longer will you be forced to cycle between weapons or tap on a touchscreen! It may take a hot minute to get acclimated to the wide array of commands, however, and it certainly doesn't help that there's no in-game method of reconfiguring the layout. (If given the choice, no doubt I would remap the Speed Booster to a face button rather than the loathsome inward Left Stick click!) In short, expect a smooth 60fps experience with responsive controls and little downtime – you'll definitely need to be 100% engaged in the action if you hope to survive!

After a short recap of Metroid Fusion, Samus touches down on Planet ZDR in search of remaining X Parasites – gelatinous organisms that transform into and retain the abilities of beings they consume. Within the next hour, you're introduced to and viciously tested on the basics of combat and exploration, including back-to-back encounters with the nearly indestructible E.M.M.I. robots who will serve as your tenacious stalkers for the duration of your stay.

Every Metroid is a masterclass in open-ended platforming, and Dread upholds this tradition marvelously. Early areas employ tricks, like sudden terrain reformation that blocks the way you came until you earn a needed upgrade, to subtly direct players along a determined route. As Samus builds her repertoire, the path ahead becomes more ambiguous, necessitating that you track down unexplored zones and previously impassable obstacles via a detailed map system many times improved over its predecessors. In this manner, Dread circumvents the handholding criticisms leveled against Fusion and Zero Mission, in which new destinations would be explicitly laid out in plain text or glowing waypoints, while also not leaving players entirely without breadcrumbs to follow.

A key facet of rebuilding Samus' arsenal is seeking hidden Energy Tanks and Missile Expansions, thereby allowing her to take more hits and dish out more destruction. Some lay in plain sight, while others require certain upgrades to obtain. Then there are the rare handful that demand perfect execution of high-level maneuvers – in one instance, you must Speed Boost along a narrow strip through a door; crouch to bank the speed charge; run through another door; slide into a narrow passage; shoot the ground below you; trigger a Shinespark in midair before your charge expires; launch toward a sloped surface to bank the charge



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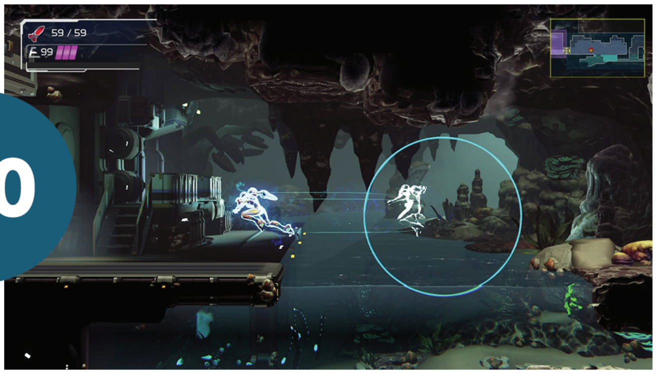


again; then repeat once more. While the spoils themselves are rarely worth the effort, it's the satisfaction of a successful acquisition after repeated failures that'll make you feel like a platforming legend!

Besides, your amount of health and ammo is far less important than you may realize – it's not like you can waltz into any boss chamber and tank your way to victory! Dread's big showdowns are as deadly as they are clever, each requiring a unique approach beyond "shoot it until it dies." No worries if you lose, as the game's generous checkpoint system will respawn you a room or two back, so it always pays to experiment with different strategies. Your crowning moment of awesome will be when that flashing yellow ring appears, indicating that a counter window has opened – answer the invite and you'll initiate an interactive cutscene during which you can fire several dozen missiles or charged shots in rapid succession. These sequences are such a treat, not only because they are the quickest means of reducing your foe to ash, but also because they showcase Samus' cooler, more methodical hunting prowess.

Dread does a fantastic job of heightening the thrill of the smallest discoveries and encounters, all while retaining the trademark Metroid atmosphere. The game doesn't just look good, it sounds good as well – the snap of electric sparks, the rustle of animals hiding in shrubbery, the hiss of steam vents. Even the voice acting direction deserves praise! From your computer navigator Adam's robotic monotone to the otherworldly inflection of the Chozo language, not even light conversation can ease the tension of exploring an alien biome. (As fanservice, Samus herself speaks a single line midway through the story. She's thankfully not the grating chatterbox she was in Other M!)

Ironically, the very thing I like least about Metroid Dread happens to be the primary focus of the game's ad campaign: the E.M.M.I. You'll encounter seven of these mechanical murder beasts throughout ZDR, all handled in the same manner – avoid detection by hiding in corners or through generous application of your Phantom Cloak camouflage ability, seek and destroy a Mother Brain-like Central Unit to obtain a temporary Omega Cannon power-up, behead the E.M.M.I. with said cannon then lose your upgrade until next time. Should an E.M.M.I. catch you, you have an extremely small window – much smaller than the tanker-sized berth granted by every other enemy in the game – to counter its attack or face instant death, no matter what armor you're wearing or how many Energy Tanks you've stockpiled.

The "dread" alluded to in the game's title references these confrontations, but in my case, the dread I feel is annoyance from the sudden gameplay shift. None of the skills or enhancements you earn during the main campaign make much of a discernible impact on E.M.M.I. avoidance strategy, so you're just repeating the same song and dance many hours into the adventure. It's not like the E.M.M.I. spawn seemingly out of thin air – unlike Fusion's SA-X whose appearance always came without warning, ensuring that you never felt safe no matter where you were. No, entrances to E.M.M.I. Zones are marked by distinct doorways constructed of floating cubes, so even the element of surprise is nonexistent. Playing cat and mouse might be novel at first, but you're bound to grow weary of failing and replaying the same segment ad nauseam.

Much lower on my list of disappointments is the dearth of impactful, original upgrades. I'll take my hat off for the Flash Shift, which lets Samus close or create distance between enemies in the blink of an eye. There's also a particular late-game Missile upgrade that I'll not name for the sake of spoilers but which is so very tasty. Aside from those, however, say hello again to the Varia and Gravity Suits, Plasma and Wave Beams, Screw Attack, etc. Dread even has the gall to introduce the Spin Boost, a weaker version of the Space Jump that is capped off at two midair jumps, only to be supplanted very quickly by the actual Space Jump. What a waste! Dread's warmed-over inventory ultimately doesn't detract from the creativity employed in other aspects of the experience, though.

Even with Samus Returns under their belt, I'll admit to being slightly worried that MercurySteam wouldn't be able to live up to the standards set by Sakamoto's original Metroid crew at Nintendo R&D1. With Dread, my worries proved to be unfounded! This is a magnificent new benchmark for the franchise! **— TONY**

It's the Tale of Son Goku . . . Again

DRAGON BALL Z: KAKAROT + A NEW POWER AWAKENS SET

DRAGON BALL IS is one of those properties that seems like it should be easy to turn into a successful video game. It's known for over-the-top martial arts, high-octane battles and memorable characters, but just like Superman, when you really stop and think about the logistics of creating playable versions of characters who can best be described as unfathomably powerful, it becomes clear that making it all work as a gameplay experience with any sort of stakes is surprisingly hard.

Fights in the Dragon Ball universe often take place at a pace faster than the human eye can see. Characters move freely in their environments with a level of agility that's difficult to even imagine, let alone assign to a controller in a way that allows your average person to comprehend what it is they're supposed to be doing.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPER: CYBERCONNECT2
RATING: T

Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot is the latest and possibly most ambitious attempt to turn the adventures of Goku and co. into an interactive experience, and it does so in the form of a sort-of open world, story-driven action RPG.

If the name "Kakarot" makes you think this will be the story of Dragon Ball told through the eyes of Son Goku, you may be surprised to find that it's actually just another retelling of DBZ. You'll train in the woods as Gohan, you'll beat up Zarbon as Vegeta and so on. Still, it's obvious how much reverence for the source material the developers had here. The game's look and sound is lovingly accurate, and there's a real thrill to be found in flying around familiar locales and seeing minor characters from Dragon Ball's past, like Master Shen and Eighter, just out there living their lives.

But that luster doesn't stick around forever. It quickly becomes apparent that this game is somehow both way too simple and way too complicated for its own good.

In the beginning you're constantly bombarded with dozens of colored orbs, currencies, character tokens, recipes, skill trees, foraging moments and more. It can feel overwhelming until you realize that very little of it actually matters. Things almost always boil down to "find your next objective and beat the pulp out of it."

The bigger issue is, I have no idea who this game is for, as this is hardly the best way to experience the story of DBZ, especially for the first time. For example, early on, Goku fights a character named Nappa. In the show, this moment has meaning because there's no actual fight. Nappa absolutely demolishes the planet's most powerful fighters, and then Goku immediately shuts him down with little to no effort. When you have a battle where Nappa is a challenge for Goku to defeat, no matter how well done the following cutscene is, you've removed all sense of gravity.

In making scenes like that more interactive, they lost what gave them impact in the first place. They only really work here if you've seen the show already, and if you have, then what exactly are you supposed to be getting out of this experience?

Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot manages to stay just fun enough to never become properly boring, but it's a surprisingly long game, and it didn't really compel me to finish it. Every time I came up to another exciting story beat, I couldn't stop thinking how much I'd rather be dusting off my DVD sets and watching the show instead.

Someone's bound to get a DBZ action/adventure game right one of these days, but unfortunately this one's a few Dragon Balls short of summoning Shenron, if you know what I mean. **– KRIS**

6.0

A Little King's Story

NI NO KUNI II: REVENANT KINGDOM – PRINCE'S EDITION

8.5

A RELENTLESS ONSLAUGHT of tasks is presented to young King Evan in Ni no Kuni II, which I imagine is accurate to the experience of actually being a king. The game has three main gameplay elements, and is really three games in one: Adventuring, kingdom-building simulator and strategy game. In this sense it is remarkably similar to Suikoden I and II.

The main plot and most sidequests happen in the adventuring portion. I really enjoyed the plot's twists and turns, each kingdom's unique style and problems and the character building of your party members alongside their respective acquaintances.

The game often gives you tasks that you can't really start because the recommended level is much higher than your present level. I found this very odd, as I always had a stack of stuff on the backburner I couldn't do.

Balancing is also an issue. The game started by being too easy, as I felt overpowered and was rarely healing, but after the third and fourth kingdom I was struggling to progress at times. There is no Easy mode to just enjoy the plot either, and I played on Normal.

The next is building Evan's kingdom of Evermore, where you spend kingsguilders produced by your citizens to build and upgrade facilities, do research and gather or develop items. You don't decide where things go, but you can decide what to focus on.

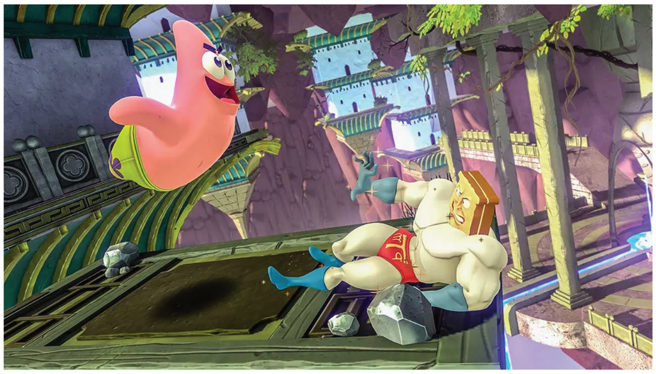
Recruiting specific citizens is essential to Evermore's growth and prosperity and is usually done through doing a favor for the recruit. This is a great game element that got repetitive and tedious. Sometimes it means defeating a beast, but sometimes the game just deliberately wastes your time by making you run around a town. You must recruit some specific citizens to move the plot along at times, but it's unspoken that in order to survive certain plot points, significant time must be spent to get your kingdom and your levels built up.

Once you build the facilities, then you can visit them and upgrade virtually every facet of all six characters. Learn and level spells, do all manner of kingdom research, incrementally upgrade armor and weapons and cook up the little sprites that help you in battle called Higgeldies. Every one of these can be a major time and money sink. I felt that my efforts rarely made much of a difference in the main game since most kingdoms offered better equipment simply by visiting them, Higgeldies could be found in the wild and my kingdom was often too fledgling to provide support in other areas.

The strategy element is found both in the main plot and the sidequests and is a basic war simulator where chibi versions of your characters and their units fight skirmishes. Each battle has its own victory requirements. This was my least favorite, as it seemed the least fleshed out. I only seemed to learn through failure, and my army always seemed to be behind the curve level-wise when a skirmish was added to my tasks. Failure came via surprise opponent reinforcements or weird circumstances most often, and with most being optional I opted to skip a lot of it.

Technically, I saw very little difference playing on PS4 versus Switch. The framerate was lower and rougher with quick camera shifts and the textures weren't as pretty, but overall I forgot about it pretty quickly. The game's beauty is unmistakable on any platform. I thought maybe the Switch would lose some voice work, but it has the same amount, as characters are sometimes fully voiced but also oddly use quick phrases and just text at other times. The plot and scenario kept me engaged even in its tedium, and while the game is different from the stellar original, it is brilliant in its own right. **— BRETT**

SWITCH
PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPER: LEVEL-5
RATING: T



Clash of the Cartoon Characters!

NICKELODEON ALL-STAR BRAWL

WE ALL KNEW that Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl would not hold a candle to the level of detail that the Super Smash Bros. series offers, but is it worth it anyway?

The game offers a Battle Mode, Arcade Mode, Online Mode and the "Extras" area. Battle Mode jumps to instant multiplayer battles where CPUs or live players can play couch co-op matches. Stock, Timed or "Sports" battles can all be chosen. The first two options are obvious, but Sports is a welcome and unique option.

Players choose between various sports balls to get through goal areas. You have to kick the soccer ball or grab and throw the football. The other balls each have interesting properties to make them more difficult to score with. For instance, the Yarn Ball has no weight, so it's tougher to get across the playfield, while the Plankton Ball is heavy and tough to do much of anything with. The Tommy Ball (from Rugrats) has lower goal posts and can be pushed by walking into it. It's an innovative way to play and reminds me a lot of BaraBariBall from Sports Friends.

All of the battle modes are available for online play by creating a lobby and changing the base rules. While that's great, the online servers are even less robust than the oft-maligned Smash servers – I noticed a lot of slowdown and even some match drops. But when it worked, it worked.

The Arcade Mode offers a single player a quick runthrough with one Nicktoon versus a random assortment from the rest of the roster. You can alter the five difficulty settings that range from Very Easy to Very Hard, and each has its own levels of reward. There is no story to be had here, just straight battles to overcome to get songs, pictures and other goodies that appear in the Extras area – along with movesets and replays.

Aside from Sports, there isn't much that's unexpected here. The roster is a great selection of zany cartoons, from OG Nicktoons like Ren & Stimpy to newer faces like Lincoln Loud. There's a character for each generation of player – but by no means does it feel complete. There have been several rumors and supposed leaks of DLC entries to flesh out more of the rich Nicktoon history, but it's all hearsay at this point. I mean, where's Donnie?!

The characters that *are* here are done very well. The animation is great and they all don a glossed 3D art style that makes them feel connected. The movesets show intimate knowledge of each character. Ren slapping Stimpy as a move had me chortling. Zim can send out Gir for an attack; SpongeBob can create a rainbow; Mikey tosses pizza at foes; all the Benders use their elements; Helga has several sports-related moves and Catdog's moveset has to be seen to be believed. It's fun trying out each character's moves.

But the game in general quickly loses its luster. The most glaring omission is immediately noticeable: Voice acting. Without each character's signature speech, the experience definitely suffers. Text boxes with canned responses are lazy and don't work here. With all the love poured into the animation, it's truly a shame we can't hear . . . *anything*, as that makes the matches seem bland.

As for stages, seeing what locales were chosen from each universe is always interesting. Some, like Ren & Stimpy's Space Madness, are virtually unplayable with scrolling and falling pieces, while others, like the Loud House, are a joy. Sometimes I won matches without landing a single punch because the stage hazards were too much to overcome. Movesets have a lot of imbalance as well.

A lot of the game feels like a rough draft, but it's simplistic enough for families to jump into for a quick match and have a lot of fun. Just don't expect to spend a ton of time with it. **– BRETT**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: GAME MILL DEVELOPERS: LUDOSITY & FAIR PLAY LABS RATING: E10+

7.5

Don't Drop the Balls!

SUPER MONKEY BALL: BANANA MANIA

WHEN I REVIEWED Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz HD back in 2019, I had two main issues with the game.

One was that if you're prone to motion sickness, there wasn't really much you could do about the bobbing and swaying of the camera to fully alleviate it. The same holds true here, so if you were bothered there, then you probably needn't read any further. There are adjustments you can make, but only on a 5-point scale rather than BBHD's 10, and I didn't even notice as much of a difference there.

My more substantial beef was the inclusion of bosses, which were not in the previous games of the series. Fortunately, as Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania is effectively a remake/remix of the first two games in the series, you don't have to worry about them here! It's just man against nature . . . or rather, ball-encased monkey against tilting obstacle course in the sky.

And it is glorious. Maybe not perfect, but still very good.

Going by some videos on YouTube, it would seem that some of the physics and controls differ a little from the GameCube original. As a result, if you're a Monkey Ball veteran, then this might throw you off a bit, especially as some of the crazier tricks used to reach the goal in those early games may be trickier to pull off here, if not impossible. If you're more of a newcomer to the franchise (like I am), then you may not even notice unless someone was to specifically point something out. Even then, some stages have been changed slightly, perhaps to compensate.

While the premise of rolling a monkey in a ball through an obstacle course to a goal is a simple one, it also proves very challenging at times. With that said, a number of new touches have been added to help keep players from feeling discouraged or giving up in frustration because they've hit a roadblock. Foremost among these is that there are no more limits on lives. This means you're more free to experiment and try different things, to get a feel for the stage before making a real run for the goal – or to try beating your best score without the risk of running through your stock.

If there are no more lives, though, then what does collecting bananas do? Along with several "missions" in the game, they add to your Banana Point total. With sufficient Banana Points, you can visit the Point Shop and purchase other characters (like Sonic, Tails and Kiryu, among others, who collect their own custom trinkets in place of bananas), costumes and even new game modes and challenges! The only downside is that most unlockable characters can't be used in several modes, mainly the multiplayer mini-games.

Other features to help you out include the Helper Mode, which doubles the time limit, shows you the optimal path through all the twists and turns with a trail of arrows as you go and even lets you slow things down by holding the R Button on your controller. If that still isn't enough and you've just *had it* with a particular level, you can choose to simply mark it as clear at any time, at a cost of 2,000 Banana Points. Doing that limits access to a few things as a result, but at least lets you continue on with the game, and you can always come back to it later.

As noted, Mini-Games are back, and they're kind of hit and miss. The fan-favorite Monkey Target doesn't seem to play as well as it used to, for instance, but I had a good time with Monkey Golf and Monkey Racing.

Overall, I really enjoyed Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania. It had everything I loved from Banana Blitz HD, and little of what I didn't. I highly recommend checking it out if you're new to the series, or if you just want to see a Dreamcast in a ball. **– DAVID**

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: RGG STUDIO
RATING: E10+

Big Fun on a Small Scale

HOT WHEELS UNLEASHED

ORANGE PLASTIC JUST might be the most nostalgic material on the planet. Followed closely by die-cast metal!

For over half a century, Hot Wheels has been leading the way in the world of toy cars. Its consistently cheap price point for new vehicles – around one dollar apiece – has insured that kids of nearly any income level could likely afford to own one or two. I honestly don't know anyone who didn't have at least a few Hot Wheels around the house as a kid. And since that's been the case for over 50 years, the potential audience for this all-new video game take on the toy line is immense.

Hot Wheels Unleashed faithfully recreates dozens of the real-world toy cars as digital driving machines, then sets them loose to blaze around wild, twisting tracks (all made out of orange plastic, of course). This game's aim is to take the race you were imagining as a kid when playing with your tangible Hot Wheels and put it on the screen as an experience you can finally fully see and control.

And honestly, it does a spectacular job at that. This game is crazy fast, super smooth and perfectly honors the brand it's been built to support.

The way it gets its reverence most right is with the perfect sense of scale. This isn't a game with Hot Wheels cars blown up to the size of your old Chevy – rather, they maintain their small proportions, existing in this world as just a few inches long, like always. Likewise the tracks are all built at Toy Story scale, letting you zoom across the basement floor, zip underneath a pool table, skid across a kitchen counter and even end up in an air duct or two from time to time. A whole lot of mundane places become much more magical when you're seeing them from the perspective of a mouse.

The racing action: also excellent. There's a heavy emphasis on drifting, as executing good drifts grants you more boost power, and liberal use of the boost button is required to score the fastest times. I never felt like I quite got dialed in to the right rhythm with drifting, though . . . which turned into a problem.

Hot Wheels Unleashed is hard. Like, unnecessarily so.

Not at first! The opening races are simple to clear. The opposing A.I.-directed vehicles put up such little resistance to being overtaken that you might very well leave them in the dust in the opening moments of the first lap and then never see them again.

The challenge comes in, though, in the super tight and restrictive time limits placed on time trial levels that you come across a little later in the single-player campaign. Try as I might, even with decades' worth of racing game experience, I couldn't clear some of the stages fast enough.

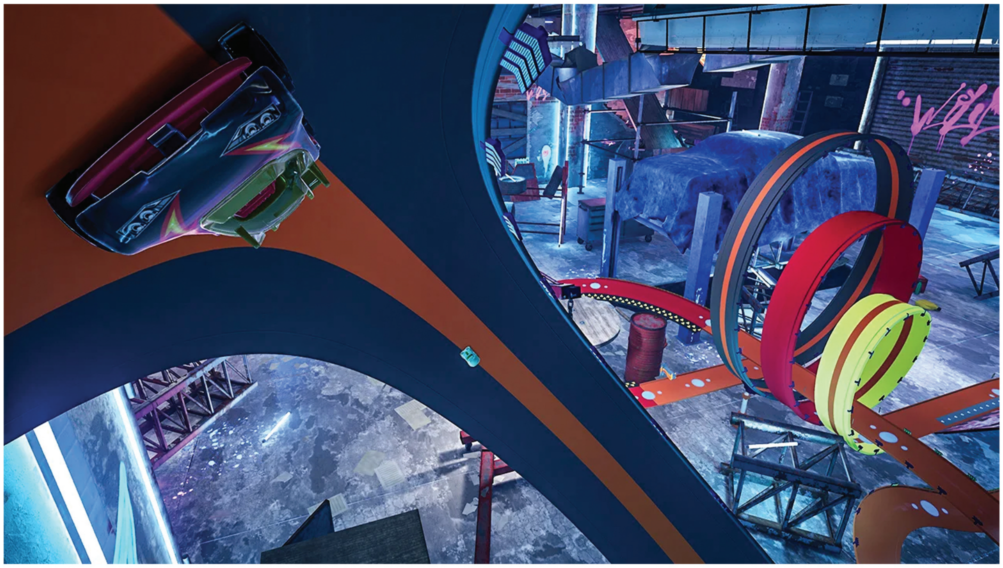
That's a problem, since it means that, though there's a massive map full of races to unlock, most players will likely stay stuck in just the first corner of the map. A huge portion of the game seems set aside only for the best of the best.

Or, perhaps, the wealthiest? If I were to be fully cynical here, I might wonder whether the game was made so punishing on purpose in order to encourage players to open up their wallets and buy better, more capable cars from the in-game, real-cash shop. You don't have to spend extra money. A few cars are given to you for free to begin with, and you can grind in-game currency to go for more. But the option to use real dollars is placed prominently right on the main menu.

I'll choose to assume the best. And I'll hope that the developers, after reading feedback about the too-tough difficulty level, will patch the game to be more accessible to Hot Wheels' biggest fans: small kids! **— LUCAS**

7.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: MILESTONE RATING: E



Arcade Racing Chaos!

CRUIS'N BLAST

I HADN'T TOUCHED a Cruis'n game in quite some time – possibly dating all the way back to the original arcade release by Williams/Midway and Nintendo that proudly heralded the imminent arrival of the Nintendo Ultra 64 in 1995. Nothing about that aged poorly, no sirree!

But when I saw that a new release, Cruis'n Blast, was appearing in arcades, complete with Nintendo's name on it? I knew I had to give it a shot. And when Tony came to visit a couple of years ago and we hit a local arcade called The Rec Room to see the game standing before us, we had our chance.

The opportunity to play was fleeting, but that only made it all the sweeter when it was announced during a Nintendo Direct that Nintendo's Cruis'n Blast would be coming to the Nintendo Switch . . . albeit not by Nintendo themselves. In fact, they seem to have had surprisingly little to do with its development!

That isn't to say they had *nothing* to do with it, however. According to legendary arcade developer and Cruis'n Blast director Eugene Jarvis, Nintendo helped steer them in the right direction to turn their quick-fix arcade experience into something a little more substantial for the home release before turning them loose. The result is a jump from just five arcade courses (found in the Switch version's Classic Arcade mode) to 29 tracks spread across six "tours," and from 12 total vehicles to 23, ranging from classic and modern cars to motorcycles, fire trucks and even a tank!

As you race, you'll not only earn experience points and level up to help improve the performance of each vehicle, but you can also grab and earn cash, as well as keys to unlock new vehicles and parts. While a bit more limited and "locked in" than in some other games, there's still a fair amount of customization you can employ to make your ride of choice feel suitably your own.

The races themselves are themed and varied, ranging from nighttime cruis'n to neon paradises, evading the police and more throughout wildly embellished real-world locations. The courses can get *crazy*, too, as Ferris wheels come unhinged and roll down and across the road, giant yetis brawl overhead, chunks of earth collapse beneath you as you soar through the air and, through it all, you keep the pedal to the metal in the hopes of scoring the W. So many of these set-pieces are spectacles through and through, giving you quite the rush.

One of my favorite aspects, though, calls back to another great car racing series we don't see around anymore. While Burnout retains its own unique flavor, there's nothing like performing a "takedown" on another car to take them out of the race.

Just as the arcade featured some adrenaline-pumping multiplayer, so too does the Switch version. However, while the avatar photograph feature is understandably absent here, more head-scratching is the lack of online play. Instead, you're resigned to racing locally with up to three other players, whether it be via splitscreen or wireless with other Switches.

Control options: You can turn rumble on or off, and you can toggle on auto-acceleration and motion steering at virtually any time. Both worked well enough in practice when I tried, though I'm not sure how well they fare on the more intense, unlockable higher difficulties.

Cruis'n Blast is a wild time from top to bottom, and what it might lack in quantity, it makes up for in quality and replayability. If you like arcade racing, don't let this pass you by. It truly is a blast! **– DAVID**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: RAW THRILLS RATING: E10+

The Wackiest WarioWare Yet!

WARIOWARE: GET IT TOGETHER!

IT'S BEEN A while since we've had a mainline WarioWare game come to a Nintendo console (not counting Game & Wario on the Wii U), and this one comes with a whole new way to play. With the Switch, we're no longer dependent on motion controls or a touchscreen, so for WarioWare: Get It Together!, you've got Wario and his entire crew under your thumbs after they get sucked into Wario's bugged-out video game console. Shoot shuriken or music notes, tackle your problems at full speed, stomp them like a Goomba or beam them up into your UFO! The possibilities are endless.

Like the previous games in the series, the main story is divided into themed collections of minigames. Every new character gets a brief tutorial level where you're introduced to their moveset, and every minigame has multiple ways to play and beat it (although some characters will give you an easier time than others). I had the easiest time playing with Ashley, who is able to fly and shoot spells in all directions, while my least favorite character to play with was 9-Volt. He zips back and forth on a skateboard and attacks upwards with his yo-yo, meaning you'll have to time both horizontal and vertical movement at once while the clock's ticking. And then there's Penny, who unlocks after the main story sequence finishes, and she requires you to manipulate the controller in the opposite direction of where you want to go. It's a concept that fits her characterization – as well as providing a sneaky method of passing some minigames – but the execution is kind of lacking, especially when the speed's gone up and you need to think fast!

All of the minigames in Get It Together! are completely new, with a few that were clearly inspired by past titles, like the one where you have to plug up a nose with whoever you're playing as. As always, everything has its own unique art style, like a modeling clay clock, low-poly corn kernels, photorealistic kitties, scribbled soccer balls or the Sanrio-esque pastel cherubs sorting items.

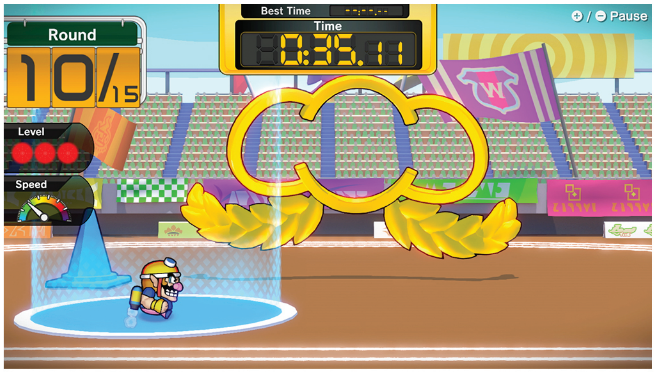
Of course, my first goal after starting was to play my way to 9-Volt's level to find out which Nintendo gems were being represented. (18-Volt and 5-Volt unfortunately did not bring their own extensive gaming collections with them, although 5-Volt's astral projection makes for a pretty unique moveset.) I was not disappointed in the least: There were tributes to Super Mario Land and Super Metroid, the tea parties in Fire Emblem: Three Houses and even a couple of Nintendo's pre-video game offerings, like their board game "Unmei no Game" (Game of Fate) and the EleConga, an electric drum machine that could be paired with an Auto Player to play custom rhythms on punch discs.

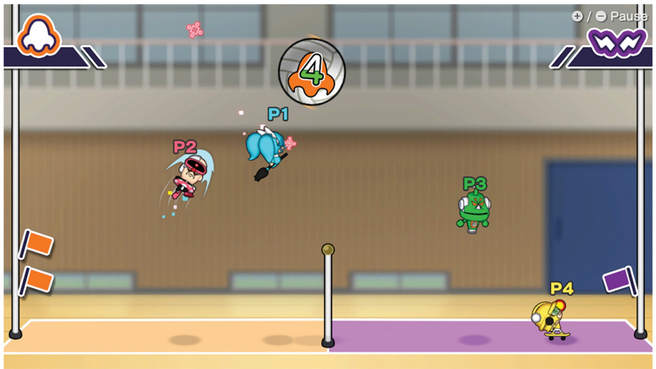
Unfortunately, turning cranks, windmills and the like is one of the more difficult controls for many of the characters to manipulate, so every time one of those minigames came up in the rotation, I'd cross my fingers that my character would be able to hit the sweet spot enough to pass.

Two-player local co-op is available right from the get-go, and along with the main story, there is also a selection of bonus games (the Variety Pack) that can be played with up to four people on one console. There are competitive games (Puck'er Up and Balloon Bang are a couple of the more fun titles I played with my husband) as well as cooperative games (Gotta Bounce and Rising Star). The strictly solo games – Daily Grind and Friendless Battle – were pretty weak offerings, with nothing to chase other than a high score. (Come on, at least leave a few coins to collect in some of those levels – those Prezzies don't come cheap!)

The only online option that is on offer is the Wario Cup, which is a weekly set of challenges that you can compete in for online rankings. Every week, a different challenge is posted, and there have been challenges that range from controlling two of the

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS RATING: E10+





20 TOTALLY UNIQUE PLAYABLE CHARACTERS

While past WarioWare titles have had this gang host the games, this time they all jump in as fully controllable characters! Each of them plays totally differently from the others, and you'll have to adapt to their quirks on the fly as you play!

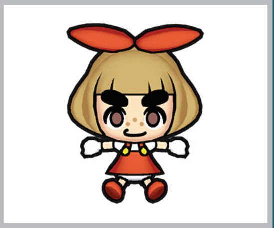
WARIO

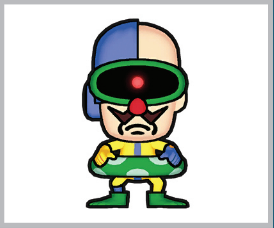
MONA

JIMMY T.

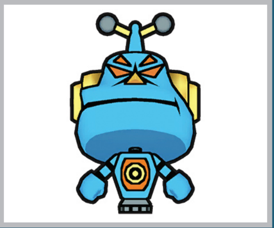
ORBULON

DRIBBLE & SPITZ


LULU


DR. CRYGOR

PENNY CRYGOR


MIKE

5-VOLT

9-VOLT

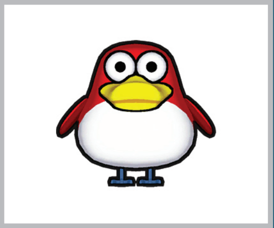
18-VOLT

YOUNG CRICKET

KAT & ANA

ASHLEY

MASTER MANTIS


PYORO

RED

same character at once to a solo grind through a curated collection of levels. You can go back and play previous challenges as well, but seeing how well you can measure up against your friends and the rest of the world is probably the biggest draw, since some of the rarer Prezzies are only available here by attaining the highest ranks.

As for extras . . . there really aren't that many. There's a gacha minigame you can play with the coins you win from passing levels and clearing missions, where you get Prezzies to give to characters to level up their Wario Cup base score. Giving Prezzies also unlocks custom colors (both individual and complete color schemes like solid gold, zombie and "shadow") and an art gallery (only five pieces!) for each character. There's nothing like the little "toys" that were available in the previous handheld and console games, which were sometimes as much fun as the minigames themselves. A virtual EleConga, complete with the ability to make your own rhythm punch cards for the Auto Player, would have been an excellent addition keeping in the spirit of WarioWare's showcasing of Nintendo's old properties, like the virtual Love Tester in WarioWare Gold.

Another major gripe: the lack of full voice acting, which was one of the best parts of WarioWare Gold. I'm surprised that the developers were able to put that much voice acting into a 3DS game (and give you the option to record your own lines!), and seeing them take a step back like this for an advanced console is disappointing.

I had fun with WarioWare, but it felt like it was over too quickly. The quality of the minigames presented is pretty high, but I would've liked to see more, especially for the characters who didn't get their own curated collections. And while the Wario Cup is good, what would *really* have made this game shine would've been the addition of online multiplayer.

If you're looking to get the most enjoyment out of this title, it's best to play with family or invite a bunch of friends over – it's a solid collection for get-togethers, but lacking in the solo play department. **– REBECCA**

7.5

7.0

Bigger. Brighter. Better?

NINTENDO SWITCH (OLED MODEL)

WHEN NINTENDO FINALLY revealed a new Switch iteration earlier this year, I figured the system would sport some new internals to improve performance and visuals for games. That's not the case with the OLED Model. It's focused on improving the tablet's screen.

So I waffled on whether to upgrade from my launch unit, which is over four and a half years old. An updated Switch that could play The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild at 60 frames per second would have been a no-brainer for me. The OLED, meanwhile, raised a lot of questions since I primarily play in TV Mode.

But man, that OLED screen definitely stuns after first booting it up. The display seems so much bigger and pops with color, with my launch unit looking dated and washed out in comparison. Metroid Dread, for example, shines on the new Switch. I've never preferred Handheld Mode over TV, but that may change going forward.

The actual unit also features enhancements. The OLED Model feels like a higher-end device, with a gloss finish on the front. I usually prefer a matte touch on tech products, but that's not the case here. The kickstand also got redesigned and spans the entire backside of the Switch. That's another smart alteration.

Now here's where things get a bit tricky. Since I'm transitioning from a launch version of Switch, the OLED Model's better battery performance is notable. But anyone who's coming from a Lite or latter iteration of the hardware won't see any difference.

Honestly, Switch OLED boils down to how much you play games portably. There is no reason to pay a premium if you prefer TV Mode. Sure, the white dock is striking and offers an ethernet jack, but those are small quality-of-life improvements.

Though as I mentioned, the fancy screen has surprised me. I played half of my Metroid Dread run in Handheld, something that wouldn't have happened without the OLED Model. And I am much more intrigued to check out some of my back catalog while resting in bed now. I've already returned to Axiom Verge after previously bouncing off the game a couple of years ago.

Yet, another part of me still wishes this new Switch had beefier internal components. I'm not arguing for exclusive games from this. Instead I just want to experience better versions of my current library and what's next up on the horizon, like Breath of the Wild 2 and Metroid Prime 4.

I purchased an Xbox Series X last year and have since become more cognizant of framerates and loading times. Microsoft's system is blisteringly fast, and games run so well on the powerful hardware. Meanwhile, Switch is showing its age these days. Breath of the Wild is still a masterpiece, but I would love to adventure through Hyrule without any choppiness. Just the ability to display Link's journey in 4K while docked would have been a step in the right direction. But that's not in the cards here either.

So if you can't tell, I'm conflicted here. The OLED screen brings new life to Switch games in Handheld Mode – they appear sharper and more vibrant. Axiom Verge with its glitchy, pixelated presentation looks better than I remember on the tablet.

Otherwise, though, you know what to expect. Playing on TV proffers no noticeable improvements. The same interface, loading times, framerates . . . you get the idea. I'll have to keep on dreaming about playing a more perfect version of Breath of the Wild.

As such, Switch OLED is purely a luxury. **– EVAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO

ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force r
the past two years. Scores reflect indivi

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
AI: The Somnium Files	8.5	Tony	#44
Alex Kidd in Miracle World DX	7.5	David	#54
Animal Crossing: New Horizons	9.0	Rebecca	#46
Ary and the Secret of Seasons	6.0	Lucas	#49
Atelier Ryza 2: Lost Legends & the Secret Fairy	8.0	Maggie	#51
Bakugan: Champions of Vestroia	6.5	Lucas	#51
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Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night	7.5	Tony	#48
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Ys IX: Monstrum Nox	9.0	Lucas	#55

SECOND OPINION
SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD + BOWSER'S FURY

"MEOW" WAS NOT my favorite word – until I beat this game called Bowser's Fury!

At the start of the game, Super Mario 3D World's Mario finds a trail of black goop. He follows it until he comes to a big black puddle. And before he knows it, the black puddle sucks him down into a world called Lake Lapcat!

Soon enough, a big bad black Bowser comes out of a sea of black goop. It's Fury Bowser! Guide Mario through the obstacle course while avoiding Bowser and his fire blasts to get your first Cat Shine. After that, Bowser goes away, and you can go to three areas in Lake Lapcat.

And you can then see that all over Lake Lapcat there are cats. So many cute cats! They're my second-favorite animal.

As you get more Cat Shines, you can wake up Giga Bells. If Bowser is rampaging and a Giga Bell is ringing, you can go to a Giga Bell, grow huge and fight Fury Bowser face to face!

Sometimes when you beat him, new areas come up where you can get more Cat Shines. If you collect enough Cat Shines, you can battle him again and again until you beat the game.

And the Cat Shines are one thing I really like about this game. You can get them anywhere you want to get them! In every area there are Cat Shines.

Sometimes you have to run through an obstacle course to get one, sometimes you have to quickly collect Blue Coins (like the special music notes in Super Mario Odyssey) or sometimes you have to beat Cat Bullies!

Yes, I said Cat Bullies. Every single enemy in Lake Lapcat has little cat ears. Goombas, Biddybuds, Prince Bully and even Boom Boom. Every enemy except for Bowser!

You get to be Giga Cat Mario for the five times you fight him. To battle Bowser, collect 5 Cat Shines, then 15, then 20, then 40 and then 50. If you beat Fury Bowser while having 50 Cat Shines, he transforms into Giant Bowser (normal Bowser, but really big). Ride on Plessie to beat him and the game.

Wait, did I mention that Bowser Jr. gets to help you? He is sad that Bowser is now big and black, so he wants to help Mario turn Bowser back.

With Cat Shines to gather and Boom Booms to beat and real kittens to take pictures with, this is my favorite video game ever.

Also, I've collected 100/100 Cat Shines. I'm not kitten around! **– CARTER**

10 LUCAS

10 CARTER

SUPERFAN INTERVIEW

Cat Girl Scratch Fever!

Catching up with Casey "WeatherWitch" George, WayForward's biggest fan!

BACK IN 2013, WayForward announced Cat Girl Without Salad, a game that was a little bit of every genre, from rhythm action to RPG. The only thing it wasn't . . . was an actual game! It was just an April Fools' joke! But not to superfans like Casey. Her unwavering love for the concept helped show the studio that this fake game had a real audience, leading to the release of Cat Girl Without Salad: Amuse-Bouche, a truly outrageous, totally playable adventure, released on Switch in 2020. But that's not the end of the story! We contacted Casey to talk all things Cat Girl: past, present and future!

NF: When did you first learn about WayForward, and specifically, Cat Girl Without Salad?
CASEY: I learned about WayForward when I got my first 3DS for Christmas in 2011! The handheld's eShop was the first time I discovered that a Nintendo console could go on to the internet and let you download games right to the system. While searching for games, two stuck out to me: Shantae: Risky's Revenge and Mighty Switch Force! The gameplay and music from both gave me memories from the Game Boy Advance era. I know being a sixth grader is a bit young to already feel nostalgia, but that's what happened. I instantly fell in love with WayForward's style of game making.

As for Cat Girl, for that we're going forward to 2013. I was finishing up eighth grade and my family, involved in the military at the time, was preparing to move to Texas! While browsing, I came across an article from April that showed a photo of a pink-haired cat girl with a GATLING GUN ARM and an alien squid. The article said, "New WayForward game is coming soon!" I was hyped looking at the fake screenshots, and right then and there I fell in LOVE with Kebako (the Cat Cirl) and Squiddie (her robot squid sidekick). After seeing it got announced on April 1 my hype DIED, but I kept hoping for it, channeling my hunger to play a real Cat Girl game into drawing Kebako all the time, often while listening to Mark "Blaz" Soto's fake Cat Girl Without Salad soundtrack on Bandcamp.

What inspired you to make your own Cat Girl Without Salad animated series, and why is it on the official MIT Scratch website?!?
I was very, VERY shy about posting stuff online for millions of strangers to see. It's nervewracking for a young teen like myself. It wasn't until 2014 when I got inspired by YouTuber Shadow759 (whom I later became close friends with) to make my own series based on Kebako. A Sonic YouTuber inspiring me? Yeah, it's crazy!

And why Scratch? Well, I had old friends from my past military moves that I talked with there. I felt Scratch was perfect for a beginner animator like me. While developing the series in secret from high school, I constantly asked myself, "If the game was real, what would the world of Cat Girl be like? What would Kebako act and sound like? And what about Squiddie? What's his story?" With the help of other Scratchers, I developed my world of Cat Girl Without Salad into a series, and we made something awesome. It also inspired other Scratchers to go into animation and programming! You can still check out my three-season Cat Girl series on Scratch, though I don't know how much the site has changed because it's been years, haha!

How did word get out about the series and how was it received by fans, including folks from WayForward themselves?
That's actually something I still don't know about! Maybe it was good old Google's handiwork. I keep my Scratch past a bit of a secret, haha! As soon as I posted my latest Scratch vid in early 2015, a guy named Adam Tierney popped up in the comments. I was like, wait . . . I saw his name in the credits of Shantae and Mighty Switch Force! *What is a guy from WayForward doing on a site like this!?* I was geeking out. It wasn't until later I discovered that he was one of the main creators of Kebako. After discussing in the comments, he gave me his email and we talked about all things Cat Girl, and he gave me a massive advice dump. It was amazing! He also gave me connections to the Cat Girl team like James Montagna, Lindsay Collins (a.k.a. Linzb0t), Matthew Greenfield and so many more great people. Encouraged by all this, I decided to create my own online persona: WeatherWitch! Or "Weather0Witch", when the username was taken by some rando from 2009 and never used again, ha!

How would you describe the WayForward fandom and your place in it?
I have noticed WayForward and the fandom has gotten a lot bigger than it was 10 years ago! As for my place in the fandom, Adam once said on a stream that "Weather/Casey is the ruler of the Cat Girl fandom and all of the space catgirls and squiddies!" I also like to think of myself as a fandom overseer of other small IP titles like Mighty Switch Force and Vitamin Connection! It's the small IPs like Cat Girl that I adore. I think they deserve just as much attention and love as the Shantae series. The little IPs have so much unexplored potential! Tapping into it would boost the company's growth, but they have to be seen to make that happen. I am still eagerly awaiting the next Mighty title, if they decide to add another installment in that series. If they do, I'll be the first to yell about it. To the world!

What have you learned from studying the work of WayForward's many artists and voice actors?
In terms of art, I've learned to explore and develop many styles, shapes, color schemes and design choices. Over time, I've developed my own aesthetic, combining influences from Disney movies like TRON and Tangled with my original love of the WayForward games. This is why I like to categorize my art and creations as PG-13: still youthful, but a little more grown-up than stuff that's only for kids. WayForward tends to lean toward that route in terms of designs and story too. For example, my main original character, WeatherWitch, is definitely inspired by Shantae, but also fused Captain Marvel, Storm and all the Disney and Nickelodeon shows I grew up with. I also created some original Space Cops characters, and a short I made about them won first prize in the high school category of a Nickelodeon animation contest back in 2015! It was heavily inspired by Mighty Switch Force, as well as my own experiences from going to Space Camp.

You may be wondering, "If Shantae and Mighty Switch Force inspired these characters, what did Kebako inspire in me?" Well, after using Kebako in my drawings for years, she became an irreplaceable part of my journey through life, so much so that I actually created my own version of her and her supporting cast, like an "alternate universe Cat Girl." While she's not legally mine in terms of copyright, she's very personal to me, and always will be.

As for acting, I love it! I have voiced a lot of creators' projects, from YouTuber Shadow759, GEO EXE's YouTube series Gwain Saga and later lending my voice in the Friday Night Funkin' community. I've also recently come out with new songs that I sang with a musician named Roboprins! Cristina Vee, singer and voice director for WayForward, inspired a lot of that. I've actually been compared to her because I sound much like her when I replicate Kebako's voice for fan projects. Fun fact: In the CGWS community, I'm always the first one to voice Kebako. While Cristina is the official voice, I've become Kebako's second voice, and I do my best to live up to that title. There's something about Ms. Vee's work that makes acting more exciting. She gives her characters life and fun and that's something I strive to do in the characters I voice!

Why is it that, after all these years, you still love making Cat Girl Without Salad fan works?
I love the series, and Kebako, because she and her world has so much potential and unexplored lore. The series should be so much bigger, and seen by so many more people! Not only can I see the Cat Girl series as a game, but as a TV show, and maybe even a movie!

I also heavily relate to Kebako. Her happy-go-lucky attitude, her forgetfulness and hyperactivity (due to my ADHD and autism), dislike for salad, her sci-fi backstory and, if I recall correctly, it was said in a stream that she unintentionally causes bad luck to others and herself. Just like myself, haha! Also her weapons are insanely cool! A gatling gun that fires laser vegetables and a thick-bladed sword!? Wow! And Squiddie is the perfect balance to her power, just a bundle of cute! They keep Kebako in line and focused, while also enjoying her energy. Kebako and Squiddie have been with me on my art journey since I was a teen and they are both very special to me. She's not only a bounty hunter, but she's also a chef and a pop star. Like her, I'm not only an artist, but I'm also an actress and a martial artist and so many other things. She defies logic in her wake and doesn't let her mistakes get to her. She's a pretty inspiring character to me, if you hadn't guessed!

As an artist, what's your ultimate goal? What does your "ideal picture of success" look like?
I just want to make sure that my years of hard work, sacrifice and school, despite COVID-19 damaging it, won't be wasted. For my short-term goal, I'd love to be an online artist with over 10k followers and 10k subscribers on YouTube. Another is to voice in more works by online creators on YouTube and Newgrounds. A long-term goal would be to work on a video game, but also work on an animated film from a big studio like Disney or Dreamworks. However, one ULTIMATE goal is something I don't know will be possible. The ultimate goal is, if Cat Girl Without Salad gets a second game, or the Kickstarter treatment like Shantae: Half-Genie Hero got, I want to become either the game's director, producer or cutscene animator. I want to add this series to my resume to let people know that on top of all the fan works, I helped make the real deal! Plus, it can inspire many artists in the internet-scape that you can get in the door by fan works! Far-fetched, but a girl can dream!

@weather0witch

INTERVIEW BY **JONATHAN HOLMES**

ARTWORK BY **CASEY GEORGE** – PAGE 78'S KEBAKO MADE IN 2021; THIS PAGE'S KEBAKO MADE IN 2014!

CHARITY FOOD ZINE

NOMTENDO!

Enjoy a smörgåsbord of Nintendo-inspired recipes and eat like a hero!

OUTSIDE OF MY work for Nintendo Force, I've been involved with the production of several zines, where groups of artists and writers publish a collection of artwork, short stories, photography and even original music and small trinkets. When I first heard about Nomtendo – a collection of Nintendo-themed artwork and yummy recipes – I asked if there would be any written work for the project, and a short time later, I was invited by Jupy, the project's lead editor, to be their guest writer for the collection!

Jupy's been involved with zines since 2011, when she assembled a group of artists for an artbook to benefit the Japanese Red Cross after Japan's devastating earthquake. Along with some special guest artists and chefs, Nomtendo includes contributions from over 130 fans: beautiful artwork, a digital soundtrack of various Nintendo remixes and delicious recipes for all occasions! My contribution: a short story I call "The Spirit of Cheer" that features Kirby on a Nintendo franchise-hopping quest to bring cheer to someone who needs it the most.

Lots of Nintendo franchises are represented, although there were a few that Jupy admitted that she wished could've gotten more love, like Star Fox and Sushi Striker (she made up for that by drawing some fanart herself). "There's still a very good spread," Jupy said, "and I think fans [will] be very happy overall."

The recipes not only include recreations of cuisine found in games such as The Legend of Zelda and Fire Emblem: Three Houses, but there are also recipes inspired by games, such as Nook's Granny Smith Apple Pies, the Onett Trash Can Burger and Hotpot Heaven Megamix. Everything's been tested by the zine's chef staff and is photographed or drawn beautifully. As for a favorite recipe or piece of artwork, Jupy says, "I really can't pick, because there are so many I love." There were some recipes that didn't make the cut, like the Nopon De Ring donuts, based on Japanese donut chain Mister Donut's Pon De Ring donuts.

The print version (limited to 100 copies) sold out within hours of going on sale October 2, leaving Jupy "beyond shocked." There's still the digital zine and soundtrack, which are available on digital marketplace Gumroad for $25 and will be on sale up until nearly the end of 2021. All proceeds will be donated to Action Against Hunger, which provides support for malnourished people worldwide.

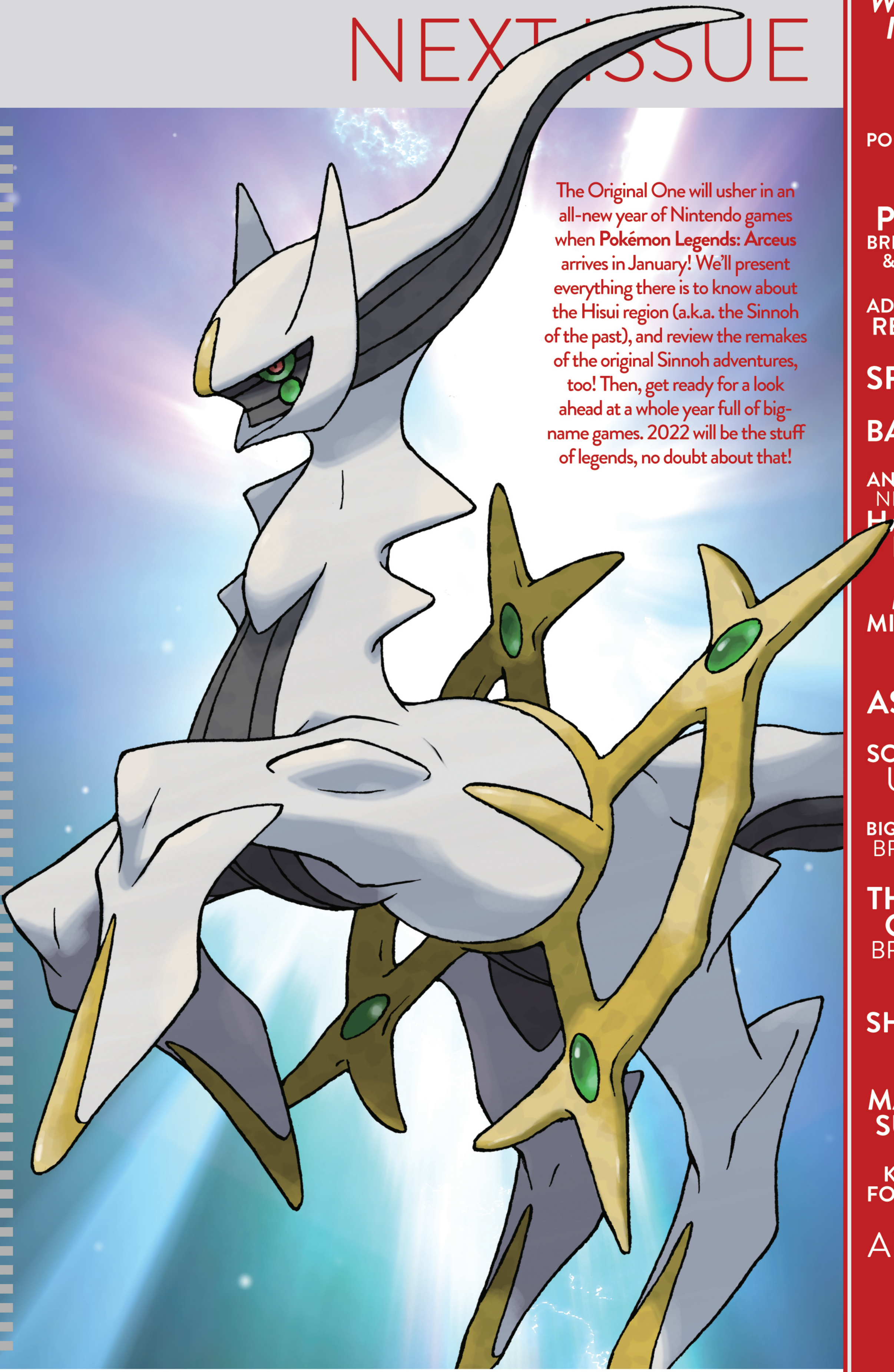
If you've ever wanted to make a zine yourself, or want to apply to be a writer or artist for one, Jupy has some words of advice: "I often see people feel sad when they're rejected . . . I encourage them to keep trying, or gather a few friends they trust and make something themselves." **— REBECCA**

nomtendozine.gumroad.com

PICTURED DISHES: YETO & YETA'S SUPERB SOUP BY **EMBYR** AND ALOLAN MALASADAS BY **CUPCAKEDEX**

BY MATTHEW TARANTO

NEXT ISSUE



The Original One will usher in an all-new year of Nintendo games when **Pokémon Legends: Arceus** arrives in January! We'll present everything there is to know about the Hisui region (a.k.a. the Sinnoh of the past), and review the remakes of the original Sinnoh adventures, too! Then, get ready for a look ahead at a whole year full of big-name games. 2022 will be the stuff of legends, no doubt about that!

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #57:

- POKÉMON LEGENDS: **ARCEUS**
- **POKÉMON** BRILLIANT DIAMOND & SHINING PEARL
- ADVANCE WARS 1+2: **RE-BOOT CAMP**
- **SPLATOON 3**
- **BAYONETTA 3**
- ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS - **HAPPY HOME PARADISE**
- **MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS**
- **ASTRIA ASCENDING**
- SONIC COLORS: ULTIMATE
- BIG BRAIN ACADEMY: BRAIN VS. BRAIN
- **THE LEGEND OF ZELDA:** BREATH OF THE WILD 2
- **SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V**
- **MARIO PARTY SUPERSTARS**
- KIRBY AND THE FORGOTTEN LAND
- AND MUCH **MORE!**

JANUARY/ FEBRUARY 2022

LOOKING BACKWARD

AS WE CLOSE out another NF issue – an issue full of "advancing" and looking at "ways forward" – I feel compelled to conclude with opposing advice:

"RETREAT! FALL BACK!"

The news that Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp has been bumped from its planned December debut and will now instead arrive sometime in the Spring is a bummer. But the added amount of wait time while WayForward keeps working also affords us fans an extra opportunity: the opportunity to go back and play the original versions of one or both games!

Yes, we're concluding our run of 2021 magazine issues with another call to go back and dust off your old Wii U unit. (If it's still available, and still operational!) The Wii U eShop is still active, thankfully, and just as you may have revisited it recently to download Metroid Fusion and Metroid: Zero Mission to help prepare yourself for the arrival of Dread, so too should you now consider a similar small shopping spree, spending $7.99 apiece on the Wii U Virtual Console versions of Advance Wars and Advance Wars 2: Black Hole Rising.

Or maybe just one of the two? I think, personally, I'll use my Wii U to go back and play back through the first Advance Wars campaign, to prime my mind and fully refresh my memory before Re-Boot Camp drops. But I'll save the Black Hole Rising half of the content to be experienced as fresh as possible on Switch.

Once again the Wii U has proven its worth as a reliable fallback position and good supporting soldier for the Switch. It's possible its eShop may not have much fight left in it, though, so move fast! **– LUCAS**

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